A NEW HARBINGER GUIDED JOURNAL

A Guided Journal to Help You Manage Overwhelming Emotions

Writing for Emotional Balance

BETH JACOBS, PH.D.

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"*Writing for Emotional Balance* is a great workbook that is well suited for people who need to get a better understanding of their own emotional lives. Jacobs is a smart and compassionate writer who provides a wide array of exercises that can help people to reach and maintain optimal emotional and mental health."

—James W. Pennebaker, professor of psychology as the University of Texas at Austin and author of *Opening Up: The Healing Power of Expressing Emotion* and *Writing to Heal: A Guided Journal for Recovering from Trauma and Emotional Upheaval*

"The ability to regulate one's emotions is a necessary component of a productive, happy life. Unfortunately, far too many people are unable to manage their reactions to the difficulties that are an inevitable part of human existence. Jacobs has written a very practical guide to help those who are unaware of and/or unable to cope with their emotions. She shows people how to use journaling to keep track of their emotional lives, so they can both be aware of their feelings and learn to understand them. This book is recommended to all who wish to gain a better ability to cope with their emotions."

—Frank Summers, Ph.D., training and supervising analyst at the Chicago Institute for Psychoanalysis, associate professor of clinical psychiatry and the behavioral sciences at the Feinberg School of Medicine at Northwestern University, and author of *Object Relations Theories and Psychopathology*

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New Harbinger Publications, Inc.

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Distributed in Canada by Raincoast Books

Copyright © 2004 by Beth Jacobs
New Harbinger Publications, Inc.
5674 Shattuck Avenue
Oakland, CA 94609

Cover design by Amy Shoup
Edited by Kayla Sussell
Acquired by Melissa Kirk
Text design by Michele Waters-Kermes

ISBN-10 1-57224-382-1
ISBN-13 978-1-57224-382-8

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Printed in the United States of America

New Harbinger Publications' website address: www.newharbinger.com

09 08 07

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

To Tara & Clay

& Rick

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Acknowledgments

This book grew out of the people whom I am so fortunate to have in my life. Lucy gave me my first glimpse and the whole base of the topic. Christine first said, "This could be a book" and launched it. Linda resuscitated it when it was needed and the editors at New Harbinger, Melissa, Carole, and Kayla, saw the raw materials and graciously helped me through the steep learning curve of making a book. Every client I've worked with has given me a piece of who I am and what I could write.

I am so thankful for the people who stood by me through this book and everything else, especially Jill and Renée, Claire, Sally, Leslie and Alex, Susan, Erin, Natalie, plus all of the ballet girls, Mary, the entire Lifshitz clan led by Ruth, and the Jacobs, Herb, Maxine, Cris, Jill, Cathy, Joan, and the memory of Francis, who got it all started. Finally and especially, my thanks to Ricky, Tara, and Clay who not only stood by me but lived with me and sustained me through every day.

Introduction

OVERWHELMING EMOTIONS: TWO VIEWS

Sara got on the train to go to work and an amazing thing happened. At the next stop, a handsome man sat down beside her and started reading exactly the same book that she was reading. He was so engrossed that he didn't even notice this strange coincidence. She glanced at him sideways. There was something sweet about him. Her heart started pounding and she wanted to say something to him, but she felt paralyzed. The train ride was over so quickly that she lost her chance. He got off the train and disappeared in the commuter rush.

Now she can't stop thinking about him and the possible meaning of their reading the same book while sitting side by side on the train. She's started getting up early and walking to the stop where he boarded the train. She keeps carrying the book although she finished it the very night she saw him. At work, her thoughts drift off as she imagines talking to him and she sometimes snaps at coworkers if they interrupt her. She longs for one more chance to make contact with him.

It's been eight months since Ray's father died. He's doing fine but he's not doing much of anything. At first, his friends complimented him on his courage and strength in dealing with his loss, but now no one seems to even remember that his father is gone. For a while, having to handle all of the details of the funeral arrangements, the will, death certificates, and

estate taxes kept him very busy. Everyone knows that Ray is the most responsible person in the family. One sister left town two days after the funeral and the other has been drinking a fair amount. His mother is still taking lots of medicine to help her sleep.

Everything has settled down, but to Ray it feels as if he's not entirely living his life anymore. It's too much bother trying to schedule getting together with other people, and he really doesn't feel involved in his work so much lately. He's going through the motions. It feels as if something important is missing, but Ray would feel so ungrateful if he were to complain. His father led a long, full life and Ray knows that he himself is healthy and doing well. He believes that people should be appreciative and count their blessings, but even that feels like too much effort.

These two stories seem to have little in common. They are about two very different people having different reactions to different types of events. But both people are overwhelmed by their emotions. Their feelings are poorly defined, interfering with their activities and dominating all of their perceptions. Their emotions are running their lives.

EMOTIONS OVERBOARD

Such disruptions caused by unbalanced feelings are called *affect dysregulation* by mental-health professionals. We all have experienced affect dysregulation at some time in our lives, when our feelings seem magnified, and we feel a physical sense of being overwhelmed, a loss of perspective, a sense that our emotions seem to be damaging our relationships, or a fragmented sense of self or purpose.

These experiences occur in large and small ways, and every person's emotional reactions and struggles are unique. Some people who were raised in generally disapproving families might find themselves frequently overcome by confusion or humiliated to the point of being unable to communicate. Others with this same background might react with angry, critical thoughts or anxious moods.

Occasionally, we all find ourselves easily provoked emotionally; for example, on a bad day, you might feel an urge to cry because the coffee shop is out of poppyseed muffins. Some people struggle with their feelings more than others and some days are better than others for all of us, but difficulties in handling our emotions are part of being human.

EMOTION MANAGEMENT

Emotions are naturally unstable and reactive, and biochemically they tend to dominate brain processes. Managing emotions can require active effort. *Emotion*

management refers to a collection of skills that enables people to work with their feelings instead of against them; to experience their emotions without undue complications.

Emotion management is not magical. Generally, we are taught to think of our emotions as murky and inexplicable, but there is a logic to emotional processes. When you comprehend your own emotional system, you can learn and use distinct skills to monitor and modify how it works.

JOURNALS FOR EMOTION MANAGEMENT

As a therapist, I have found journals to be very effective tools for emotion management. Journals are like a checkpoint between your emotions and the world. They are very private but allow you to view your feelings from some distance. In a journal, you can clarify, release, organize, and soothe your feelings. You can experiment without consequences. Journals provide flexibility for approaching and understanding your own emotions.

The impetus for my thinking about journals as therapeutic tools came from the people in my practice. I noticed a lot of my clients mentioned their journals spontaneously and in different ways. I soon learned that there are as many ways to use journals as there are people. I discussed journals with more people and then I started giving my clients suggestions about how to use them.

Some people really need to write to force their emotions to the surface or to articulate their feelings. Some of my clients already had piles of notebooks filled with descriptions of their emotions. They needed help with containing their feelings, and we worked with various techniques to limit or structure their writing. Other people used their journals to transition from the help they received in therapy to using the skills they possessed on their own. What impressed me most of all was the fact that the accomplishments of emotion management demonstrated in clients' journals carried over into their lives. The model developed in the writing was the foundation of an applicable skill.

A growing body of research is documenting a variety of benefits of journaling. Studies suggest that writing helps to organize chaotic emotional impressions so that feelings can be compactly stored in memory in a way that is compatible with brain structure (Smyth and Greenberg 2000). In addition to organizing and expressing emotion, the physical act of writing itself can soothe and provide emotional release. The privacy of journals also builds a sense of personal creativity and autonomy. Journals bring together a unique constellation of qualities that are well-suited to handling the complexity of emotions.

THIS GUIDED JOURNAL

All of these realizations grew into this guided journal and its underlying plan. It is based on how I've seen people grow and develop in therapy and how I've seen people use journaling. This guided journal gives you information, ideas, and active exercises to help you feel more comfortable with your emotional life and to achieve a greater degree of mastery over it. This book lays out the purpose and procedure for each of the exercises and provides space for you to complete them. The exercises give you actual experience or practice in the skills you've read about.

The journal is designed to be used with handwriting, but any exercise can be typed (or word processed) with the journal next to the keyboard. The soothing characteristics of journal writing also apply to a keyboard if that is the instrument with which you are comfortable.

The many aspects of emotion management are reflected in the variety of exercises. Some exercises provoke deep thought and feeling, others might make you laugh. The chapters of the guided journal proceed systematically, but if you need help in just some areas, you can zoom in on those specific chapters. And if some exercises seem difficult, you can still benefit from reading the text and skipping over those exercises. Emotion management is a lifelong, ongoing process; it is not something you perfect or finish.

There are eight chapters in this guided journal, one to help launch the project and seven on the sets of skills that add up to emotion management. These are the abilities to distance, define, release, refocus, organize, regroup, and maintain. Each of these abilities, when applied to emotions, is like a strand of a very strong rope. Through your reading and participating in the exercises, you will learn to weave these strands together.

When you have finished moving through this guided journal, you will have a different view of your emotional world. You definitely will gain new skills and knowledge, but these are not the final results of working with this book. The end results will be that you will experience a greater sense of flexibility within yourself and an ongoing confidence in how you live with your emotions.

• CHAPTER 1 •

Begin!

In this chapter I'll present an overview of this guided journal and the steps you need to take to develop emotion management skills. I'll start with a brief definition of what emotions are, describe how we experience them, how they become problems, and exactly what is meant by "emotion management." I will also touch on a developmental view of emotion management, briefly explaining how we all learn emotion management skills and how we all sometimes miss out on learning them.

Finally, you will examine and start to experience how perfectly suited journals are as tools to manage your emotions. With this information, you will revisit Sara and Ray, who were described in the introduction, and think about how different their scenarios would be with the addition of emotion management skills. More importantly, you can look at your own scenarios and set some goals based on how you'd like to change.

This chapter will provide you with a frame of reference for working with your own guided journal. Any new skill, especially in the realm of emotions, is absorbed more easily and thoroughly if you have your bearings, or a sense of where you are relative to where you want to go.

EMOTIONS DEFINED

Our reactions to our world exist in an extremely complex and changeable internal climate of feelings. *Emotions* are states of being with a physical basis in the body and a uniquely personal sense of meaning. In the strictly physical sense, an

emotion is the stimulation of a pathway of nerve cells, or neurons, in the brain. This pathway interconnects with other brain systems that regulate other physical systems in the body.

For instance, a specific pathway has been identified for the feeling of anxiety, which activates certain physical responses (LeDoux 2002). The physical symptoms of anxiety, such as a racing heart and pulse, shortness of breath, shakiness, and sweating, are the result of such signals from the brain.

The experience of anxiety, however, also includes the person's interpretation of these physical symptoms and of the stimulus that caused the anxious reaction. We identify the feeling we are experiencing, and we attribute the cause of that feeling to something. (Note that in this book, the terms "emotions" and "feelings" are almost interchangeable. *Feeling* has the connotation of emphasizing the named and interpreted aspect of an emotion, but feelings and emotions are both variations of the same complex experience.)

EMOTIONAL REGULATION

When emotions or feelings are doing their work, they protect us, inform our decisions, connect us with others, and give our lives richness and texture. When they are well regulated, different feelings blend harmoniously and we stay within a comfortable margin of stimulation. This view of optimal emotional functioning, however, is just a concept and is not a static, unchanging condition of anyone's life. When emotions become *dysregulated*, they produce various degrees of distress, confusion, and erratic behavior.

Emotions, Moods, and Disorders

Levels of emotional dysregulation often are confused with the descriptive distinctions between emotions, moods, and disorders. An emotion is a physical event plus an understanding: brain circuits are fired and change the state of your body and you mentally recognize and categorize the experience. As opposed to a mood, emotions don't last particularly long and are associated with specific stimuli. An emotion or feeling is about someone or something in particular. Furthermore, feelings can, and usually do, coexist with contradictory feelings about the same or other things.

Emotions can be momentarily intense and overwhelming, but *moods* are more persistent states and cause you to see everything in a particular light. A mood is not felt as an aspect of experience; it encompasses experience. If an emotion is like being in a rainstorm, a mood is like being underwater.

We all are born with individual temperaments that provide us with tendencies toward particular types of emotional responses and certain intensities. The

temperaments we are born with determine how our brain circuits fire and how reactive our bodies are. Then our life experiences add the element of interpretation that determines how we categorize our reactions. Any troublesome tendencies we might have can become disorders when they are part of a specific set of severe symptoms that last a long time and consistently interfere with life functioning.

EMOTIONAL DYSREGULATION

Emotions are *reactive*. That means they arise as reactions to the world you live in, and there is a natural ebb and flow of energy as your emotions evolve and change. Some tension is always present because a mixture of feelings and intentions is also always present.

Emotional dysregulation begins when the intensity levels of feelings start to rise uncomfortably. The natural tensions become too dissonant. When that happens, you lose your emotional equilibrium and the chaotic sense of dysregulation intensifies.

WHAT IS EMOTION MANAGEMENT?

Emotion management is a way of handling your feelings so that they stay in balance most easily. Emotion management is understanding your feelings well enough to examine them, accept their natural developments, and make considered decisions about responding to or expressing them. Ironically, learning to adapt to the variability of your emotional states produces a very solid sense of personal power.

THE "THREE C'S" OF EMOTION MANAGEMENT

Emotion management can be said to be composed of "Three C's": consciousness, clarity, and coherence. Your first goal is to keep thinking, or stay conscious. Next, you try to clarify what's going on. Finally, you work to modify either the situation or your reactions to it so that the various parts of yourself fit together coherently and you can move toward your goals, without being torn by internal confusion and conflict.

Staying Conscious

Staying conscious can be harder than it sounds. When the brain is overloaded, the most complex processes are the first to go, especially those involved in

making plans or synthesizing thought processes. In intense situations, the brain functions most adapted to survival, such as the circuits that generate emotional responses, will dominate. Emotion management skills fight this tendency. You can learn to maintain or to quickly regain those thought processes that might otherwise be lost under emotional pressure.

Achieving Clarity

To achieve and maintain clarity, you must have the ability to think about a feeling while you are experiencing it. With emotion management skills, you can evaluate an emotion as you experience it and decide where to focus your attention. This gives you the freedom both to decide what to express about the emotion and to modify your environment if you want to modulate that feeling's intensity.

The Sense of Coherence

Maintaining a sense of coherence relies on the most advanced skills of emotion management. To feel coherent, emotions need to be familiar, understandable, and accepted without judgment. They should blend together smoothly and mix comfortably with your specific personality and general experience of yourself. This requires you to study your own emotional system to get a full view of how you operate. Emotion management includes the idea that your emotions do not disrupt a positive, harmonious, and unified sense of yourself.

Consciousness, clarity, and coherence are all amenable to being developed and refined with writing. The act of writing itself forces thoughts to consciousness, and the structure of language brings organization or clarity to feeling. Coherence can be a long-term result of writing and keeping journals. It develops through any method of careful observation of the different facets of your feelings over time and in different situations.

It's important to note here the absence of another C-word: "control." You will work with this topic in later chapters of this book, but it is important to know that efforts to control emotions usually tend to backfire. Emotions are the dynamic and spontaneous results of many forces. Working with feelings always helps more than working against them.

LARGE AND SMALL USES OF EMOTION MANAGEMENT

Emotion management skills are usually small and simple behaviors or adjustments. At the same time, the accumulation of these skills leads to profound changes in the quality of a life. For instance, you might write a paragraph every day describing

the high and low points of the day. Pretty soon you might see a pattern in what usually causes the low point. You could then make adjustments to avoid or buffer the kinds of events that make you feel bad. You might do no more than realize that there is a reason for your feelings and that would cause you to see yourself in a more compassionate light. Those nightly paragraphs can clear out the debris of the day's feelings, but eventually they can clear the debris off of the path you want to follow in your life.

Besides helping with the large- and small-scale problems of feelings, emotion management skills help with all types of dysregulation problems. When your feelings are conflicted, these skills can help you to sort, comprehend, and integrate all of your emotions. For people whose feelings quickly evolve into moods, these skills can be used to intervene before uncomfortable feelings begin to expand and generalize. In other words, if you can manage your angry feelings, you might not feel as if the traffic is also so aggravating. People with mood disorders can develop emotion management skills that, if used consistently, can have a preventive effect on extreme moods.

Components of Emotion Management

In this book, emotion management is broken down into distinct, learnable skills. The first exercise is a list of the skill components of emotion management. It doesn't cover everything, but makes clear many ideas that roughly follow the learning sequence in this book. As you read this list, you might see ways that writing can help with all of the processes of managing your emotions.

EXERCISE 1

Wish List

Read through the following list and put checkmarks next to the skills you would like to learn. Cross out those you don't need to learn or that don't seem useful. When you finish the whole list, circle those skills that feel really urgent for you to master.

Emotionally, I wish I was capable of . . .

- keeping my perspective on my feelings.
- understanding my feelings.
- naming my feelings.
- keeping my sense of humor.
- knowing where my feelings come from.
- not getting so worked up.
- not getting so worked up so quickly.
- staying open-minded about my feelings.
- letting go of bad feelings from my past.
- not always reacting to losses (fill in the blank).
- calming myself down.
- enjoying my experiences more.
- stopping my thoughts from becoming repetitive and destructive when I'm upset.
- staying in the here and now.
- knowing how to get organized.
- being optimistic.
- tolerating contradictory feelings at the same time.
- tolerating emotional uncertainty.
- accepting the limits of the control I have over my feelings.
- experiencing myself and my life more positively.
- holding on to the progress I make emotionally.

Keeping all of these components of emotion management in mind will help you to see that there is a step-by-step process that can move you toward your goals of emotion management. Keep these fragments of emotion management in mind as you learn more about them throughout this book.

HOW DO PEOPLE LEARN EMOTION MANAGEMENT?

From the moment we are born, every skill we develop is applied to the emotional realm, although we don't usually think in those terms. For instance, we know that babies vocalize before they talk and we understand linguistically how baby "nonsense" syllables provide the basics of language formation. But the tone of those baby sounds and how adults respond to them is also the beginning of being able to discriminate between different emotional states. When babies make cute noises and people respond positively, the babies learn what a good emotional state feels like, and the experience and understanding of happiness evolve out of this raw material.

The Earliest Sense of Emotions

Every step of the way, further growth and development add layers of complexity to the communication and understanding of emotions. Five-week-old babies might only be able to turn their heads and look at things, but they innately show a preference for looking at faces (DeGangi 2000), and facial expressions teach them about peoples' emotional responses. A two-year-old has the capacity to physically approach and leave people and can understand much more complicated facial expressions. Experimenting with these new behaviors gives the toddler a wealth of information about how people feel.

These early interactions also directly affect brain development. Chemical reactions take place as a result of interpersonal interactions. Positive, matched facial interactions cause the release of endorphins from the part of the brain called the anterior pituitary. The endorphins act directly on dopamine receptors in subcortical areas of the brain that regulate arousal and reward (Schore 2003). Scientists have actually traced the mechanism in the brain that corresponds to a universal feeling; we all like to get positive attention. As Joseph Ledoux explains in *The Synaptic Self* (2002), experience changes the brain and then those changes reinforce neuronal pathways making it more likely for that experience to recur. With the brain and early relationships affecting each other, emotional learning accelerates exponentially.

The Complexity of Emotions

Three- or four-year-old children can add verbal abilities and abstract thinking to the mix of emotional development. They can learn to name feelings, wonder about them, and imagine different emotional events. The possibilities for emotional response are limitless when imagination can be applied to feelings, and so, at that point in a child's development, the capacity to manage emotions is essentially in place.

Learning to Evaluate Emotions

Judgment becomes possible once a child understands different emotions and realizes that there are choices about how to behave emotionally. Every interaction that a child comprehends gives the child more information about people's attitudes toward feelings. Children learn a generally understood emotional vocabulary, and the limits of acceptable emotional expression become clear, often without requiring direct verbal exchanges.

A child's excitement can be encouraged with a smiling response, but a shift in expression or a withdrawing posture can tell the child that the fun has moved past an acceptable level. A child who hears an adult say, "That's fine" through clenched teeth does not need to be told that whatever it is, is not fine and that acknowledging that fact is not allowed.

When children are unsure about situations, as they often are in early childhood, they read cues about how to respond from people who are important to them. Children are motivated to maintain their attachments, so they tend to adopt these cues readily. They have neither the complex reasoning skills necessary to question the validity of the responses they learn at young ages nor a wide range of experiences with other people for comparison. Early emotional socialization is deeply absorbed and physically imprinted. It's not surprising that it's so difficult to modify the basic evaluations of our own feelings that are internalized so early in our lives.

PROBLEMS IN DEVELOPING EMOTION MANAGEMENT

There is obviously more than one correct way to learn a process as complex as emotion management. For all of us, many different factors combine to limit our potential for managing emotions.

Internal Variables

Physiological realities always place some limits on emotional development. Differences in cortical structure and chemical structure have profound impacts on what we can process and express. Some brains are clearly more reactive than others; maybe they require less of a chemical reaction to cause neurons to fire or perhaps they need more feedback to stop the neurons from firing once they have been activated. Everyone has some "hardwired" or innate emotional tendencies that interact with learning every step of the way.

Interactive Variables

The relationships between developing children and their caregivers are the medium in which all emotional learning takes place. Sometimes children have poor teachers or models for emotion management abilities. Sometimes the caregiver has trouble tolerating a child's temperament, either being overwhelmed by a very reactive child or put off by a more naturally withdrawn child. And some caretakers simply have trouble being patient with the extreme or confusing behaviors children can exhibit as they learn the skills of managing and communicating their feelings. If a child's interactions are not compatible with a caregiver's expectations at any stage, both emotional attachment and further emotional learning can unravel.

The Effects of Disapproval

As we grow older, disapproval can fuel cycles of confusion in our emotional development. Everyone grows up with the message that some feelings are invalid, intolerable, or impossible to express. Those feelings get mangled: sometimes buried, sometimes defiantly displayed, sometimes *displaced*. When feelings are displaced, they are attributed to the wrong situation or person, as when someone makes extraordinary efforts to please another person at work because he or she is really wishing for approval from a critical parent. Feelings that have been made shameful because of disapproval are often expressed inappropriately or ineffectively and this can lead easily to more disapproval. This is one way in which the emotional dynamics within families can become so locked-in and destructive. Poor emotion management reinforces itself.

The main reason children are taught that their emotions are "bad" is because the people they are learning from are still struggling with managing their own emotions. Disapproval gets handed down. We all grow up strongly affected by the implicit messages we receive as children when we observe how our parents and other adults deal with their own feelings. We either model ourselves after the adults in our lives or we act in an opposite, reactionary manner. Children of a

parent with a bad temper can become either emotionally uncontrolled themselves or so terrified of others' anger that they become too self-contained and can't express themselves emotionally. Throughout our lives, we carry some impression from our first examples of emotion management.

The Persistence of Emotion Management Problems into Adulthood

As adults, every stage of learning how to regulate our feelings is still evolving. We have the physical and mental skills we need at our disposal and we have a huge accumulation of interactions as data to help us comprehend our internal emotional worlds. But we build on the incomplete accomplishments of our younger selves. Our deficits can become covered over or avoided, up to a point. Past that point, emotional dysregulation begins.

Sometimes adult emotional skills seem like beautiful structures built on marshy swampland. We may comprehend a lot but continue to respond emotionally with patterns embedded in our unbalanced early experiences. As we interact with more people, we constantly modify our ideas about what we want to do with our emotions, but we also reinforce patterns that we observed and learned in our early years.

EMOTION MANAGEMENT AND JOURNALS

When you consider the complexity of the problem of emotion management, it seems incredible that keeping a journal can help significantly. But many research findings and clinical experiences point in the same direction: there are real benefits to journaling and many of these benefits relate to emotion management.

The Benefits of Journaling

A series of studies by James Pennebaker (1997; 2004) shows a wide range of emotional and physical benefits of personal writing. The first finding demonstrated that student research subjects who wrote about their emotional disturbances for twenty minutes a day for four consecutive days needed fewer health services than students who didn't write or students who wrote about unemotional topics.

This intriguing finding was repeated in many studies that showed journaling benefits by measures as diverse as psychological well-being, sleep improvement, immune functioning, pain levels, and blood pressure (Pennebaker 2004). A synthesis of studies on therapeutic writing concluded that improvement in four important areas was consistently related to emotional writing: reported health,

psychological well-being, physiological well-being, and general functioning (Smyth 1998).

A later article speculated on the reasons for the clinical successes associated with journaling (Smyth and Greenberg 2000). One major benefit is the opportunity to reexperience trauma in a situation that's safe and allows people to control the intensity of the experience because they can stop it at will. But even more, the researchers believe that writing changes traumatic memories from chaotic impressions into an organized mental framework. PET scan research actually has demonstrated that these less chaotic memories are more easily integrated in the brain and therefore they are less easily evoked by stimuli and less uncomfortable when evoked. That means there are fewer flashbacks of trauma for survivors (Smyth and Greenberg 2000). What helps to make change is the combination of letting the feeling out and structuring it.

The Emotional Benefits of Journaling When in Therapy

Clinical experience parallels these findings. In my practice, keeping journals frequently helps people either to elaborate on or to consolidate improvement they make in therapy. Sometimes people use their journals to expand on a theme that came up during a therapy session. Many people use journals to help internalize the comfort they receive from the therapy. One client brought in pages from her journal for me to read, and I would write a response to give to her at the next session. By writing over the course of the week, this client knew that I'd be aware of her feelings and respond to them. This knowledge made it easier for her to observe and contain her feelings.

On a larger scale, I often recommend that people start journaling when they are close to ending therapy. This helps them practice working through their feelings on their own, so they become more independent of the therapy.

When people change their usual writing processes to freshen their observations, they seem to get more out of journaling. Research agrees that adding structure and positive emotional words to your writing can increase its benefit (Pennebaker 2004).

In therapy, people who tend to write pages and pages every night do well with an assignment that limits them. For example, I might ask clients to try to write a one-page summary of a feeling. Or sometimes we experiment with ideas like shifting focus, writing lists, answering specific questions, or arguing against feelings. Many exercises in this guided journal derive from successful outcomes with clients who kept journals while in therapy and from figuring out how and why these strategies work.

A True Story

One interesting event concerning journaling occurred when a client was struggling to perceive and believe something about her own motivations in relationships. I tried to express a particular point one way and another, but my communication wasn't effective. Then, one day, my client found an old journal that she had written at the age of sixteen. She was amazed to discover that she had written about the identical motivations as an adolescent with a clarity that still rang perfectly. From that point on, she was able to really comprehend and work on her relationships. She had to read it from the outside, but the message had to come from within her own self.

JOURNALING TAKES PLACE INSIDE AND OUTSIDE OURSELVES

The story above illustrates an important principle of how journals work. Journals exist in a halfway space between ourselves and the outside world. The concept of this kind of "transitional" zone was expressed by the brilliant pediatrician-turned-analyst D. W. Winnicott (1965). Some objects or make-believe activities help children to develop by giving them a space in which to experiment. The unique quality of that space is that it is outside of their bodies but within their own imaginative realm. Journals play with that same space.

When we write, our thoughts and feelings are moved outside of our minds and onto paper, but we, ourselves, are our primary audience. When we keep a journal, we can experience ourselves or parts of ourselves from the outside and the inside simultaneously.

SARA AND RAY REVISITED

To illustrate the basic concepts of emotion management and the applications of journaling, consider Sara's and Ray's problems, which were described in the introduction. Sara's unresolved emotions had swept her into a realm of obsessive fantasy, and Ray, stuck in a pervasive sadness, was ignoring many signs that he might be depressed. If each of them kept a journal and knew some of the skills of emotion management, how would their stories change?

Sara's Story

Sara got on the train to go to work and an amazing thing happened. At the next stop, a handsome man sat down beside her and started reading exactly the same book that she was reading. She immediately felt funny and recognized that

her heart was pounding, which she knew was usually a symptom of anxiety. She took three deep breaths to calm down and looked out the window for a moment to refocus herself. Although she felt calmer, she didn't feel comfortable enough to try speaking to the man. She recognized her limits but stayed flexible, realizing that any self-criticism about her inability to start a conversation would only compound her disappointment.

Still, when she got to work, she found herself fantasizing about the man. She recognized this as an indirect expression of some unrecognized feeling. So she closed the door to her office and got out her journal. She was tempted to write a short story about her romantic possibilities with this man. But she had filled reams of paper with stories of romantic possibilities and she knew this only fueled her feelings instead of resolving them. So she started writing freely about anything else that came to mind.

The overcast sky outside her window reminded her of a day when she was much younger, shortly after her parents' divorce. She found herself becoming tearful as she described the gap she had felt in her life after her father left. She had never even had a chance to get to know him. This memory suddenly matched the longing the stranger on the train had evoked in her. She understood the connection.

It was all about how lonely she felt, and she sighed. She put down her pen, hid her journal, and called her best friend. They made plans to have dinner together that night and Sara knew that dinner with her friend would be a reliable comfort. Then she got to work on the report her supervisor needed.

Ray's Story

It's been eight months since Ray's father died. He's doing fine but he's not doing much of anything. He feels that his grief about losing his father is constant and relentless. It seems to have infiltrated his whole life and he feels lethargic, withdrawn, and doesn't sleep well. Ray's family tends not to talk about feelings and they certainly don't use words like "depression," but Ray is aware that some of his feelings might be symptoms of something more than a normal reaction to a profound loss.

He's even thought of getting some professional help and has looked up the names of some therapists in the yellow pages. But each time he looked, he closed the book and thought maybe he was a little better than he had been last week or maybe he would be a little better next week.

Ray has a good friend who works in a bookstore, and sometimes his friend has good ideas about how to handle hard situations. So he dropped by the bookstore and went out for coffee with his friend. It actually helped to confide to someone how worried he was about himself. His friend didn't think his worry was unwarranted. His friend had also been wondering about what was going on with

Ray. His friend also gave Ray some advice. He told Ray to write in a journal every day and to notice what themes emerged in his writing over time and how he felt as he made his journal entries. He told Ray that was how he kept track of his own feelings.

That night Ray began writing in a journal. The writing was both an interesting activity for him and, somehow, emotionally soothing. It felt good to express himself honestly, and the privacy that journal writing gave him was also a big relief. He realized how much pressure he'd always felt to be responsible and unemotional, holding it together while the others in his family went their separate ways. He'd been worried that if he allowed himself to feel anything at all, he would completely lose his composure. But the journal seemed to contain his feelings and allowed him to express how he felt a little at a time. Ray made a plan to write every day for a month and see if his feelings changed. After a month, he could make a more informed decision about what kind of help he might need with his feelings.

WHAT EMOTION MANAGEMENT SKILLS CAN DO FOR YOU

Adding some emotion management skills to Sara's and Ray's stories didn't make their bad feelings disappear. Sara still felt anxious when she thought about the man on the train, but she recognized her anxious feelings and managed them physically. As an experienced "journaler," she knew how to stop herself from spinning into self-blame or fantasy. She continued using her journal to make historic connections between the feelings that didn't make much sense in the present and those that had made a lot of sense in her past. She chose an adaptive and releasing solution to her current situation.

In his new story, Ray learned how to recognize his feelings and take them seriously. Venting to his friend and starting to keep a journal opened up a whole new range of possibilities for emotion management. He could get his feelings out at a pace that he could tolerate, so the feelings became less threatening. He loved the privacy of journaling because he didn't have to worry about other people's responses to his feelings. Over time, he used the journal to foster a broader perspective and to get a better sense of his own emotional processes.

Journaling can help you in the same ways that it helped Sara and Ray. The exercises in this book will show you how to develop the same skills that they learned. You will also work on recognizing the cues that indicate when to use which skills. No amount of emotion management prevents painful feelings from arising, but it is really amazing how different your feelings will seem to you when you understand them, respect them, express them, calm them down, and can make satisfying choices about them.

YOUR OWN SCENARIOS

In the next exercise, you will write "before" and "after" scenarios of your own like Sara's and Ray's "before" accounts in the introduction and their "after" accounts above.

EXERCISE 2

My Before and After Scenarios

For the first part of the exercise, briefly describe one specific event or typical emotional scenario that really bothers you. You can use your name, or someone else's, or you can write in the first person, using "I" and "me." Make it a story that illustrates the type of overwhelming situation that makes you wish for greater ability to manage your feelings.

"Before": Being Emotionally Overwhelmed

When you finish writing your "Before" scenario, try to distance yourself from your feelings and put that story behind you. With the knowledge you've gained about emotion management, rewrite your story. Start the story the same way as in the first part of the exercise, but try to write about yourself as someone with ideal emotion management skills and observe how important details of your story change.

"After": Managing Emotional Situations Skillfully

This exercise describes an overwhelming situation that brought you here and how you would like to see it change. One way to describe your goals for this journal work is to describe the emotionally capable person you would like to become, in the "after" story. This vision will help you to follow your progress throughout this journal, and the clarity of your ideal image of yourself will give you a direction in which to aim.

YOUR GOALS: YOUR PATH

This book can show you the path from here to there. Although you can't go back and get your past needs met, you can learn to fill in some of the gaps in your emotional repertoire that prevent you from getting your needs met in the present.

Guided journaling can weave together the ideas that will be presented to you in this book and your developing skills and awareness. The journal is designed to walk with you step-by-step as you develop your skills of observation and emotion management, as well as different parts of yourself.

• CHAPTER 2 •

Distance!

This chapter of the guided journal is about different ways to obtain some distance from your emotions. Being able to establish distance from your emotions, or changing perspective, is the necessary condition for managing feelings, because you can't see or understand something if you are right in the middle of it. A slightly distant and more complete view on a feeling always makes managing it easier.

You will start with a basic skill of emotion management that helps you to see your feelings on a workable scale. This skill is the emotional equivalent of "zooming out" from a visual image with a telephoto lens. When you focus on an object, its qualities and presence dominate your view. But if you zoom out to take in a landscape that surrounds the object, it becomes something different. It's still there, and it may still be visually striking, but the object's impact changes within a broader context, just as your feelings can seem different relative to a broader understanding. Once you see the bigger picture, the object or feeling will never seem quite the same.

To gain some distance from your emotional state, you need to remember only two principles: (1) time changes emotions and (2) point of view changes emotions.

Journaling helps you keep these two principles in mind easily and naturally. In this chapter, you will write at different times and from different personal perspectives. As you demonstrate the concepts to yourself in your writing, your emotional outlook will widen.

TIME AND EMOTIONS

The most critical aspect of distancing yourself from your emotions is the awareness of time passing. Over time, feelings change into other feelings. Acute feelings do not last. Improvement in managing feelings takes place slowly. If a tiny corner of your mind remains conscious of these facts at all times, you can hold on to hope and a broader perspective.

This is quite different from the idea that time heals all wounds. Over time, unmanaged or unacknowledged feelings are more likely to fester than to resolve themselves, and they are prone to resurfacing. You need more than just time to manage your feelings, but developing your emotional memory is a necessary skill. You can't work with feelings unless you can remember different emotional states than the one you are currently experiencing.

JOURNALS AND MEMORY

Journal entries tangibly record the emotional changes you experience by providing written "snapshots" of your feelings at different times. Journaling preserves previous emotional states that memory might lose. When your general emotional state changes, your memory tends to rewrite history. Your brain chemistry actually may shift so that your memories are encoded differently and stored with less-related memories, as if they are misfiled. Journals provide a record of your original viewpoint, or response to an event, even when that viewpoint has changed.

Most people are ambivalent about rereading their journals. Sometimes it can be embarrassing to revisit a state of mind that now seems petty or misguided. Sometimes it's discouraging to see repetitive themes. But even this difficult information can be useful to review. At other times, rereading your journals can be inspiring or simply fun, when you see from a distance that you like who you used to be or how you said what you had to say. It's best to approach old journals when you are in a nostalgic mood or have a specific question, but that is never necessary. One of the good things about journals is that they will wait for the best time to be read.

Journals Chart Bad Times

Journals are particularly useful in unstable or volatile emotional situations, such as a medical crisis or a change in residence or relationships. At those times, journals help people to ground themselves by allowing them to chart the

emotional roller-coaster ride. When you document your extreme or variable feelings, you will see a process. You'll feel yourself moving through your changes, instead of bouncing back and forth between your feelings. When you turn the pages of your journal, emotional time becomes real to you.

The changed perspective that journaling can give you helps you to prevent panicking if you are feeling stuck in negative emotions. Some of the worst emotional experiences and their repercussions occur because of the desperation people feel when they believe they are permanently trapped in a painful feeling. But that is never true. You can be trapped in patterns or beliefs or biochemical tendencies, but not in your feelings. Feelings are organic processes that run a course. That course may be slow or repetitive, but there is always some room for adjustment in the flow of emotions.

Journals Preserve Good Times

Many people use their journals, like religion, only in the worst of times. But we benefit from recording our good feelings as well as our unpleasant ones, as Pennebaker (2004) and other studies note. Each time you write descriptions of positive feelings, you counteract the idea that bad feelings are all you can ever experience. Writing about your good experiences reinforces them.

Reading a description of a specific memory of a good experience can serve as an emotional anchor when you are feeling overwhelmed. The next exercise will help you set up your own emotional anchor. Your memory can become a positive emotional reference point, to remind you of your range of possibilities when you are at your worst, feeling rotten and hopeless. When you describe a happy memory in your journal, you will be mentally reinforcing that memory so that it might occur to you later, in difficult times.

You can also use the same format of this exercise later. For example, when you have any good experience or feeling, you can record it as you will in this journal to reinforce and store it. Then, if your emotions are veering toward despair, you can reread these descriptions and they will give you a different perspective. Or, you can try to pull yourself out of despair by writing a description of a positive memory in that bad moment.

Your emotional reference should be a memory of a time you felt good, but not ecstatic. If the good memory took place in ordinary circumstances, it will be easier to recall and to believe that good feeling can come around again. For instance, it's easier to hope for the return of the good feeling of relaxing on a park bench in the sun than of the excitement of winning an award. If you have trouble finding a suitable memory right now, come back to this exercise later.

EXERCISE 3

A Positive Emotional Reference Point

Complete the following paragraph.

I remember a good feeling . in . 2006 . or 7 . . . .
[when]

I simply felt . . incredibly lucky, at peace, and competent.
[describe the feeling in a few words]

I was . . skiing the grand canyons solo . . . . , and I remember
[where]

noticing . . how quiet, stormy, and foreboding it was. It was a time
[something sensory]

in my life when I was doing . well . financially and getting adventures
[an activity or a general description]

I'll never forget . the snow, storm, light, and pow . . . . . . around me.
[people, weather, environment, etc.]

I'll never be right there again but I know I CAN feel that way again.

Writing about the details of your memory will set it firmly in your mind. By writing it down, you actually create a mental shortcut to your memory.

Now take a moment and focus on what you usually feel like when you're feeling overwhelmed. Then, read your paragraph about feeling good again. Go back and forth a few times between your memory of feeling overwhelmed and your journal description of feeling good. By doing this, you are creating an association between feeling overwhelmed and your positive memory. The next time you feel overwhelmed you may spontaneously think of this memory, or, at least, you will find it easier to access mentally. By recording positive memories, you are saving up a better perspective for a rainy day, and on those days any help is significant.

JOURNALS AND CHANGE

Gradually incorporating positive feelings into your writing and your memories builds a sense of optimism that can counteract despair. Journaling also fends off discouragement by documenting slow change that can be hard to recognize in the short term. Documenting your own perceptions over time will provide you with evidence of change that your current feelings might overshadow.

Exercise 4 demonstrates a few time frames of emotional memory. It will show you exactly how your memory can shift and how journal writing can document that shift. This exercise has three parts. The three parts illustrate three time frames: a decade, a day, and a month. One day needs to pass between your completion of part 1 and part 2, and one month needs to pass between your completion of part 2 and part 3. Whenever you do part 1, write a note to yourself or mark your calendar to do part 2 the next day and part 3 one month later.

Exercise 4 is set up in this complicated manner because it allows two kinds of interesting comparisons: one is how you feel about yourself at different times and the other is what you actually felt like compared to your memory of your feelings. What we used to feel like and what we remember feeling are never exactly the same thing.

EXERCISE 4

Emotional Views over Time, Part 1 (A Decade)

Complete this brief paragraph.

It is . . . . [today's date].
Right now, this is how I feel about myself:

. . . .

. . . .

. . . .

. . . .

. . . .

. . . .

Now, think back to ten years ago. What were you doing then, where did you live, what were your concerns? Use only present tense verbs for this part of the exercise. That will help to place yourself as if you were back in the past time frame. Now complete this brief paragraph.

It is . . . . [date ten years ago].
Right now, this is how I feel about myself:

. . . .

. . . .

. . . .

. . . .

. . . .

. . . .

You can skip to the section, "VIEWPOINT AND EMOTIONS," after you've done Part 1 and written your reminder notes to yourself.

EXERCISE 4

Emotional Views over Time, Part 2 (A Day)

(Note: Right now it should be one day after you completed Part 1 of this exercise.)

Complete the following two paragraphs.

It is . . . . [today's date].
Right now, this is how I feel about myself:

. . . .

Yesterday, this is how felt about myself:

. . . .

The next part of this exercise will be done one month from today. Make sure you have a reminder where you'll notice it in a month and right now, either go to the section, "VIEWPOINT AND EMOTIONS" or return to wherever you are in this book.

EXERCISE 4

Emotional Views over Time, Part 3 (A Month)

(Note: You should be completing this part of this exercise one month after you completed Part 2.)

Complete the following two paragraphs.

It is . . . . [today's date].
Right now, this is how I feel about myself:

. . . .

. . . .

. . . .

. . . .

. . . .

. . . .

One month ago, this is how I felt about myself:

. . . .

. . . .

. . . .

. . . .

. . . .

. . . .

. . . .

. . . .

. . . .

. . . .

There are two ways to look at the parts of Exercise 4. First, look at each part in itself and see how your feelings can change over different time frames. The degree of emotional change can be misleading. Sometimes day-to-day change can look larger than long-term change. Like visual perspective, sometimes the longer view washes out the vivid details you see close-up. Use this space to summarize the changes you recorded in your writing in the one-decade, one-day, and one-month samples.

In one decade, I changed:

. . . .

. . . .

. . . .

. . . .

In one day, I changed:

. . . .

. . . .

. . . .

. . . .

In one month, I changed:

. . . .

. . . .

. . . .

. . . .

The second comparison looks from one part of the exercise to another. This comparison is between past feelings and your memories of past feelings. To make this comparison, look at the first half of part 1 versus the second half of part 2. That will show you how much your memory changed reality in one day. Then compare the first half of part 2 with the second half of part 3. That will show you what one month does to the accuracy of your memory of your feelings. Notice particularly what types of embellishments you might have attached to your memories that weren't there at the time and what details you omitted because you forgot them over time. Use the following space to note the changes you notice.

Discrepancies between my feelings and my memory of them one day later:

. . . .

. . . .

. . . .

Discrepancies between my feelings and my memory of them one month later:

. . . .

. . . .

. . . .

Changing Perspectives

This exercise demonstrates how changes in perspective over time can be captured by journaling. If you were to keep a long-term journal and pull out all your references to an important topic, you would see more of the kinds of changes this exercise illustrates. Journal writing preserves the emotional moment that would otherwise be constantly folding into the next event.

Emotional Biases

Comparing your memory of your feelings to your descriptions of your feelings that were written in the past also reveals some of your underlying emotional biases. Observations you erroneously add to your memories will show either wishful or negative inaccuracies in how you appraise yourself. Details you forget over time will show parts of yourself you may not want to see or remember. These comparisons can provide very interesting insights into your unconscious self-perceptions. They also lead to the next topic, which is about the subjectivity of emotional perspective. Time is only one factor of emotional perspective: almost all of us are less objective than we think we are.

VIEWPOINT AND EMOTIONS

You may be reading this section before you have finished your one-month comparison and summary of Exercise 4. Completing Exercise 4 will show you even more vividly what you've probably begun to see and all you need to know to continue

with this guided journal: time alters feelings and changes how you recall feelings. (Be sure to go back to Exercise 4 when it's time. It's very interesting to see these ideas in action.) Remembering these ideas helps you to keep your emotions at a manageable distance. But, emotions are not only temporal. They are also entirely subjective experiences. Another essential aspect of obtaining emotional distance is knowing that your feelings are only one possible reaction to a situation and not the only "right" reaction.

Every individual has a unique interpretation of the world. What seems emotionally obvious to any person depends on their particular understanding of the moment. When discussing matters of feeling, "objective reality," "logic," or "rationality" are the terms people usually use to describe interpretations of events that fit with their own emotions. The next exercise will demonstrate a version of this phenomenon.

EXERCISE 5

Three Views

Pick three people: a person who knows you well, an acquaintance who doesn't know you well, and a person who makes you feel uncomfortable. Write their names on the lines below. Then think of a major event in your life and describe it or comment on it from the viewpoint of each of these people. Try to write what each person would describe as well as how they would describe it. Try to capture each voice. If it's hard to find an event to use as the subject, use yourself and have each person describe you in his or her voice.

. . . . [a person who knows me well]

. . . .

. . . .

. . . .

. . . .

. . . . [an acquaintance who doesn't know me well]

. . . .

. . . .

. . . .

. . . .

. . . .

. . . . [a person who makes me feel uncomfortable]

. . . .

. . . .

. . . .

. . . .

Your writing should demonstrate how differently people can perceive anything. You might even notice how you can get caught up in another's perspective when you try hard to describe it from that person's particular viewpoint. It is natural to be impressionable emotionally. That fact accounts for a lot of the variability of our feelings as we encounter people and information that change our viewpoints. Remembering this can help you to move fluidly with your changing feelings instead of fighting them because of a misguided notion about the necessity of being consistent or objective.

THE SUBJECTIVITY OF EMOTIONS

Our personal assessments color our world more than we can know. I was struck by this in the weeks after September 11, 2001. I sat in session after session of therapy with different clients who were all describing the same event. I was amazed that nothing repetitive was said in any of those sessions. Throughout those weeks, people shared their reactions with each other, but in therapy, each person was the center of his or her own story.

Every single person viewed it from a different angle. Some people were very angry, some were frightened, some felt guilty. Some people were obsessed with the details of the attacks and some were triggered to remember histories of terrible abuse or unpredictability in their lives. Some people felt more connected emotionally to other people, while some felt alienated or insignificant. Every person struggled to fit the same event into their own emotional paradigm of tragedy and disaster, and each paradigm was the result of a singular lifetime of feelings.

This backdrop of personal experience is all we have to make sense of our emotions. Emotions begin as physiological events. Some researchers have theorized that there are only two types of these events: positive and negative, and that everything else is our elaboration. Others have studied facial expressions and have found four or five basic "universal" emotions: happiness, sadness, anger, fear, and/or disgust (Fonagy et al. 2002). Whatever the basic mechanism is that takes place, when we apply the basic physical experience to our own templates of meaning, it becomes very complex and personal.

We miss so much that doesn't fit into our construction of reality. For example, consider someone coming home with news of a promotion at work. A partner with a history of early loss might react to the news with tears, believing that the promotion signals the beginning of eventual abandonment. Another type of person, one who was criticized and harshly judged during his or her upbringing, might hear the news and become belligerent, seeing the promotion as a competitive challenge. Meanwhile, the person who happily received the promotion, and who just wanted to celebrate, might be utterly bewildered with the partner's response.

Journaling Keeps the "My" in "My Feelings"

Remembering how prejudiced all of our interpretations are can neutralize our emotions. This is an intellectual way to create some distance from your feelings. Journals are excellent tools for developing this skill. Anything that is written down gives us a feeling of personal ownership. We see the expressions of our feelings as our own creation. This can help to remind us that we can see only from behind our own eyes.

USING YOUR PERSPECTIVE

Sometimes when people are very depressed or upset, their perspective is actually a symptom of their emotional state. But if you develop your capacity to zoom out from your feelings, then creating some emotional distance can help you to hold onto hope. It can also help you to survey your situation with greater breadth and flexibility, and that, in turn, can help you feel calmer and allow you to make better decisions. A journal can capture a picture of you at a particular moment for you to review at any time or from any vantage point.

• CHAPTER 3 •

Define!

Now that you've begun to develop the ability to view your emotions from some distance, the next step is to define exactly what those emotions are. Defining an emotion sums up an entire experience made up of sensations, images, and thoughts. You will also look at the process of identifying your feelings and evaluating their intensities. This generalized process of definition will be complemented by specifically examining your own typical emotional patterns. Delineating your emotional tendencies will give you a handle on most of the issues you are working to manage, because, usually and unfortunately, emotion management problems circle around the same basic territory over and over again.

DEFINING EMOTIONS

To name a feeling provides a powerful tool for emotion management. It encloses the feeling instead of allowing it to enclose you like an invisible vapor. A name gives a feeling a place to rest in your mind instead of allowing it to bounce around randomly or repetitively. A name can contain and quiet a feeling, which is fundamental to managing your emotions.

The Elements of Experiencing Feelings

Feelings are made up of many experiences. The physiological base of an emotion produces changes in our physical state, which can then evoke cognitive

processes, which are complex brain functions such as thoughts and memories. All of this is condensed into a name or label for the feeling.

The physiological changes occur first in the sequence, but they don't always register first. For example, you might think, "It's so annoying when . . . ," several minutes after your muscles have started to tense and your breathing has become shallow. Some feelings have more obvious physiological manifestations than others, but the physical aspects of feelings always provide early warnings and valuable information.

Exercise 6 breaks down the separate parts involved in the process of experiencing an emotion. The exercise works backward from the summary word to the parts of perceptions and sensations. This is like taking apart an appliance to see how it works. After completing this exercise, the next time you experience components of feelings that seem vague or unrelated you will have a better sense of how they can fit together.

EXERCISE 6

The Components of Experiencing Emotions

Pick a word for an emotion you know well or that you feel frequently or very strongly, and write it in capital letters at the top of the exercise. Then write three short descriptions of your experience of this emotion without using the names of any other feelings. In the first part, describe thought processes that accompany this feeling for you, including memories or statements about yourself or other people. In the second part, describe any sensory impressions or types of experiences that tend to accompany this emotion, like heightened colors, a vision of a face, irritating sounds, and so forth. The last part should describe the physical sensations that go along with this emotion. Consider your heart and breathing rate, skin sensations, muscle tension, and internal organ functioning.

.... [NAME OF THE FEELING]

1. Thought processes:

2. Sensory experiences:

3. Physical sensations:

Exercise 6 will heighten your awareness of earlier and more subtle indications of this feeling. For a while, try to notice the most minute aspects of your feelings as you go through the day. You can develop greater emotional alertness by focusing on the kind of detail you noted in this exercise. You might try carrying a memo pad with you and reconstructing this exercise for your different feelings. If you observe the early cues of your feelings, usually you can do something to avoid problems, and if your feelings are well-defined, your management strategies will be too.

Which Feeling?

It helps to know as much as possible about what you're feeling to give your management skills a target. Vague or diffuse feelings are unruly and hard to focus on. The process of defining feelings is critical to emotion management because it engages you mentally and it draws boundary lines around the problem.

Even though you might understand the components of your feelings, sometimes it can still be hard to know exactly what you are feeling. Emotions can blend together like watercolors, and a physical sensation such as a knot in your stomach can indicate a variety of feelings ranging from excited anticipation to anxiety to fear or rage.

There is no formula for identifying emotions. Our emotional vocabularies are built from and limited by our interactions as we grew up. We can never know precisely what someone else means by naming a feeling, like children who wonder if everyone sees the same thing they do when they name a color. But we can learn to develop a sense of our own emotional definitions if we think about the words we use in a fresh way. Exercise 7 will refresh your view of some basic emotions.

EXERCISE 7

Qualities of Feelings

Complete the following incomplete sentences for each of the feelings listed.

Happiness:

If this feeling was a color, it would be . . . .

If this feeling was weather, it would be . . . .

If this feeling was a landscape, it would be . . . .

If this feeling was music, it would sound like . . . .

If this feeling was one object, it would be . . . .

Sadness:

If this feeling was a color, it would be . . . .

If this feeling was weather, it would be . . . .

If this feeling was a landscape, it would be . . . .

If this feeling was music, it would sound like . . . .

If this feeling was one object, it would be . . . .

Fear:

If this feeling was a color, it would be . . . .

If this feeling was weather, it would be . . . .

If this feeling was a landscape, it would be . . . .

If this feeling was music, it would sound like . . . .

If this feeling was one object, it would be . . . .

Longing:

If this feeling was a color, it would be . . . .

If this feeling was weather, it would be . . . .

If this feeling was a landscape, it would be . . . .

If this feeling was music, it would sound like . . . .

If this feeling was one object, it would be . . . .

Humiliation:

If this feeling was a color, it would be .

If this feeling was weather, it would be .

If this feeling was a landscape, it would be . .

If this feeling was music, it would sound like .

If this feeling was one object, it would be . .

Exercise 7 was designed to refine your sense of certain feelings by upsetting any pat concepts you might have about what feelings mean. Although feelings are not precisely delineated events, they don't have to be foggy. Whether you imagine happiness as bright orange or light lavender, it is important to be able to recognize it when you feel it.

EVALUATING EMOTIONS

After you name a feeling, some other qualities have to be evaluated to help with managing it. First, you want to assess the intensity of the feeling: how strongly do you feel it, how long have you felt it, does it feel as if it's building up slowly or is it mushrooming quickly? For example, you might take a wait-and-see approach with a mild feeling of annoyance, when you'd go outside for a fast walk if you were boiling mad.

Besides intensity, you can assess how direct a feeling is. Some feelings are natural reactions and some are indirect or secondary spin-offs to an initial reaction. Such second-degree feelings can be very strong but they often lead to bad decisions because, usually, they are criticisms. It's important to know which feelings are secondary because most of the time they must be cleared out to get to the direct, or main, issue.

On the other hand, it's useless and counterproductive to try to assess the validity of feelings. Within the bounds of extremes, no emotion is more legitimate than any other. We can't choose what we feel. We can choose ways to set up our lives to influence our feelings, and later chapters of this book will give you lots of ideas on that topic. But feelings arise spontaneously and no reaction makes absolute or unqualified sense. A lot of energy is wasted and harm is done when people try to justify their feelings.

How Much Feeling?

There is no absolute scale to apply to measure emotions. Some people say they're sad when a trivial event disrupts their morning. When others say they are sad, they mean they are lying in bed crying and unable to move because of their sadness. The only real way to evaluate the intensity of your feelings is relative to your own experience.

Exercise 8 presents a system for creating a personal scale to measure your emotions. You can elaborate on the emotion you dissected in Exercise 6 or you can choose another intense feeling to evaluate. For the first step, label your feeling at the top of the exercise in capital letters. Then list every possible manifestation of the feeling you can imagine on the left-hand side under "Descriptors." You can draw on the ideas you developed in the last two exercises, using the concepts of the physical, sensory, and cognitive aspects of a feeling.

EXERCISE 8

Intensities of Feelings

. . . . [NAME OF THE FEELING]

Descriptors	1 to 10 Rating
1.	(. . . . .)
2.	(. . . . .)
3.	(. . . . .)
4.	(. . . . .)
5.	(. . . . .)
6.	(. . . . .)
7.	(. . . . .)
8.	(. . . . .)
9.	(. . . . .)
10.	(. . . . .)
11.	(. . . . .)
12.	(. . . . .)

After writing your list, you will quantify your qualitative descriptions. Think of your own 0 to 10 scale for this feeling, with 0 meaning the absence of the feeling and 10 meaning the most intense and vivid experience of the emotion that is possible.

Now, go back to your list and write a number after each descriptor for the emotion that estimates how intense the feeling would be when you experience or notice that description. Anxiety is a good example. For example, a hollow feeling in the chest might be a 1, your slightest indicator of anxiety. You might rate indicators like a thumping heart or sudden, vivid memories of past failures as a 5 because they may occur when you're moderately anxious. But experiences like extreme nausea, catastrophic thoughts, or difficulty in focusing your eyes would be close to 10 because they are likely to be manifestations of extreme anxiety. Don't spend too much time on this, but estimate a number to put on each line.

The last part of this exercise is to compile the descriptions. Label all of your level 1 to 3 descriptors as mild, 4 to 6 as moderate, and 7 to 10 as extreme. Then write a short summary of each group. If you don't have any numbers in one of the three groups, just work with the words "mild," "moderate," or "extreme" and imagine the emotion at that level. Write a brief sketch of your experience of the feeling at each level.

Mild . . . . [feeling]: . . . .

. . . .

. . . .

. . . .

. . . .

Moderate . . . . [feeling]: . . . .

. . . .

. . . .

. . . .

. . . .

Extreme . . . . [feeling]: . . . .

. . . .

. . . .

. . . .

. . . .

Learning how to evaluate your own range of emotions can help you keep your perspective in some situations. For example, you might feel bad about something, but also be able to remind yourself that it's just a fairly low-level feeling. Or you might recognize a point when you're becoming too excited about something and be able to think of ways to calm down before your feelings escalate uncomfortably. Also, you can make better decisions based on the intensity levels of your feelings. For instance, the next time you have a telephone conversation with an irritating person, you might decide that when you've reached the number 7 in your frustration level, you should get off the phone to avoid an exasperated outburst.

You might also notice that the intensity levels of your feelings give you clues about the course your feelings will typically follow. Some people zoom up to 10s quickly and then their feelings dissipate. A "slow burn" person might move up his or her emotional scale slowly, but may have more trouble with chronic moods.

The patterns of your own emotional intensity levels are keys to some of the principles that govern your emotional world.

Primary and Secondary Feelings

Sometimes feelings are difficult to evaluate because they become entangled with feelings *about* feelings. That's when the ability to distinguish primary from secondary feelings becomes important. Primary or direct feelings are uncomplicated, straightforward reactions. Scott Spradlin (2003) describes them as also being unlearned and adaptive. *Primary emotions* protect, inform, or alert us in useful ways.

In contrast, *secondary emotions* may obscure or cloud over situations. They are the judgmental and wasteful reactions to our own primary feelings that we learned through disapproving interactions. Scott Spradlin (2003) illustrates the difference between primary and secondary emotions with a story about meeting up with a rabid-looking dog. The initial feeling of fear and the physical mobilization to avoid the dog are primary reactions. They might save your life. But later, possible feelings of shame about being afraid, or anger with others' reactions to your fear are secondary emotions. They are both arbitrary and unproductive.

You can decrease your secondary feelings by remembering that there is no such thing as an invalid feeling. There are just feelings. The worst behavior occurs when people try to validate their feelings. Very often, people who feel that they aren't allowed to get mad will inflame a situation so it becomes obvious and bad enough to justify the angry feelings they had from the start. This is an unfortunate link in the cycle of abusive situations.

People who feel shame about feeling envious may tend to belittle the people they envy or even themselves. Some people avoid the care they need and lavish it on others because they disrespect their own needy feelings. These people often get labeled as martyrs, like the tired working mother who insists on cooking holiday meals for the extended family when she really just wants attention herself and maybe a hot bath. Where does that kind of behavior wind up? Back to the beginning, by creating even needier feelings. As a rule, efforts to validate our feelings usually do nothing but carry us backward right into the feeling we're trying to avoid. On the other hand, chapter 7 will show you how to cultivate positive secondary feelings, such as appreciating your own efforts or feeling compassion for your own sadness or grief.

Exercise 9 will actively demonstrate how you can separate some of your secondary emotions from the primary emotion. To start with, you will write a simple statement of a direct feeling you have experienced as a reaction to something specific. Some examples might be: "When I have to wait for someone, I tend to feel enraged." Or, "When someone pays me a compliment, I tend to feel tongue-tied and can't even say, 'thank you.'"

EXERCISE 9

Simplifying Your Emotions

First, complete this sentence:

When . . . .

. . . .

I tend to feel . . . .

Now, think of three people who can be or have been critical of you. You can include yourself. Write their names at the beginning of each paragraph and then finish the three short paragraphs based on how you think each person would criticize you for making the statement you made at the beginning of this exercise.

. . . . : You [I] shouldn't feel that because . . . .

. . . .

. . . .

. . . .

. . . . : You [I] shouldn't feel that because . . . .

. . . .

. . . .

. . . .

. . . . : You [I] shouldn't feel that because . . . .

. . . .

. . . .

. . . .

Now, cross out the three paragraphs. You can erase them if you used a pencil, delete them if you used a keyboard, color or scribble on them, or just draw a line through the words. Then reread your original statement as it stands by itself. This will literally return your focus to your primary feeling. It is what it is. You can see how much simpler it is to handle an emotion without having to deal with the burden of a harsh judgment, your own or other people's.

DEFINING YOUR EMOTIONAL PATTERNS

So far, you've gained some skills at first taking a good look at and then defining your emotions. You can put together the pieces of an experience and name the feeling, rate its intensity, and separate out your primary reactions from the secondary clutter. This base of general clarity will support the next step, which is to find the specific emotions and emotional patterns that are unique to you.

We are all prone to certain feelings and we all live with a basic prototype of what feels bad to us and what feels good. This prototype was developed long before we had words for it, and its form was imprinted on us by our earliest relationships. It is easily overlooked because it is so basic. But such prototypes are like deep ruts into which related experiences easily flow. If we can understand our basic patterns, we can predict a lot of our reactions. And you can buffer or modify what you see coming.

Your Emotional Rut

Our personal sense of emotional pain is primitive, deeply felt, and avoided at most costs. This feeling comes from our earliest, or traumatic, experiences of frustration and shock, at a time when our relationships determined our entire world and even our survival. Early, intense experiences, filtered through our temperaments and the reality of imperfect caretakers, make deep impressions. The extraordinary complexity of emotional development is still based on the simple shape of these early impressions.

At the end of chapter 2, emotional subjectivity was discussed for the purpose of learning how to distance yourself from your emotions. Now you will try to define your own emotional template or paradigm. Seeing your own paradigm can be very difficult because it is the whole background for all of your experience. It can be a very disorienting experience, like stepping away from the set of a television studio and realizing the entire nineteenth-century New York tenement you were in is right next to the commissary of a twenty-first-century corporate office park.

Understanding your own most basic feelings requires you to dig through some of your history. Many layers of emotional sediment cover your oldest feelings, and major events can shift or fold the whole formation like a geological disturbance. Serious excavation is a slow process, central to many psychotherapies.

Exercise 10 is a brief investigation into some layers of feelings. You will look back at some early experiences and then apply that understanding to current situations. Think about those times in your past when you lost your emotional balance. What kind of feelings did you have that were troublesome, hard to handle, and possibly destructive to you or your relationships? And what kind of experiences provoked these feelings? The exercise will require you to write three brief stories from your past that will illustrate those times when you "lost it" emotionally.

The first story should date from your adolescence or young adult life. There is rarely a shortage of material from that time of life. The second story should date from your childhood. Choose a story from the time you were school-age, about five to twelve years old. The third and final story should be your first, that is, your earliest, memory of being overwhelmed by emotion. Try to put words to an experience that might have happened before you could even describe it verbally. You could also describe a story you've frequently heard about yourself before your memories start. For each story, try to summarize the situation, what you actually remember feeling, and your behavior.

EXERCISE 10

Layers of Feelings

Emotionally overwhelming experience as an adolescent or young adult:

. . . .

. . . .

. . . .

. . . .

. . . .

. . . .

Emotionally overwhelming experience as a school-age child:

. . . .

. . . .

. . . .

. . . .

. . . .

. . . .

Earliest memory of an emotionally overwhelming experience:

. . . .

. . . .

. . . .

. . . .

. . . .

. . . .

When you finish writing this series of three difficult stories, go back, reread everything you wrote, and choose one word that will name the dominant emotion in each story.

Young adult overwhelming feeling: . . . .

School-age overwhelming feeling: . . . .

Earliest overwhelming feeling: . . . .

You might use the same word three times or you might find your feelings changed a lot over time. Sometimes you can discover a core emotional theme that may feel rawer or more basic the further back in time you go. For example, a young adult woman feeling jealousy about losing a boyfriend to another girl might have felt anger as a child when a friend betrayed an important secret. But her earliest feeling might be despair, when she recalls feeling abandoned because her mother was in the hospital. The stories are all about abandonments of some sort, but they become more complicated as she gets older.

Some people tend to turn their pain inward on themselves, and they may experience shades of shame, helplessness, and emptiness. More outwardly oriented people might report anger, jealousy, and disappointment. Sometimes there is no discernable pattern and that in itself also can be a quality of your emotions.

THE POWER OF PREDICTING EMOTIONAL PATTERNS

It might seem as if you're just digging up 101 Ways to Feel Bad, but there is a purpose to Exercise 10. The more specifically you understand what overwhelmed you

in the past, the greater your ability will be to predict what types of situations will disturb your emotional balance in the present.

Prediction helps the management of emotions on several levels. If you are aware of an impending emotionally bad situation, sometimes you can avoid it. For example, people with domineering parents might easily be thrown off balance by suggestions from their employers. Such people might do well to ask for instructions in writing so they can process them before reacting. On the other hand, someone with very withdrawn parents might welcome receiving the information in conversations with the manager. What threatens us emotionally are situations that bring up old painful patterns, and what may provoke intense discomfort in one person may be perfectly neutral to the next.

If a difficult situation is unavoidable and you see it coming, you can still work on modifying it. If you know a separation is looming and you are going to react strongly, you can make plans to contact the person who will be away, or you can see other people more often during the time that person will be absent, or you can carry a memento of the person whom you're missing for comfort. If nothing else, understanding your emotional triggers prevents you from being caught off guard. Feeling sideswiped or surprised by bad feelings can be even worse than just feeling them. Predictability, though, builds in an overview that helps to calm difficult reactions.

Armed with these views from your past, you can now examine specific triggers to watch for in the present. The following exercise will help you to refine your view of your own emotional danger spots.

EXERCISE 11

Your Emotional Triggers

Choose the feeling from the list of three in Exercise 10 that is currently your biggest problem and title this exercise with that feeling:

[Name the feeling] . . . .

Briefly list four situations you recall that made you feel this feeling, regardless of how you handled it. If you run short of examples, you can make up typical ones or just stop. Also, you might recall the example you used in Exercise 2, if you need help getting started.

1. . . . .

2. . . . .

3. . . . .

4. . . . . . .

Now, answer the following questions to try and find the common factors in these situations besides the fact that they trigger your troublesome feeling.

1. How many people besides yourself are usually in your stories? . . . .
2. Which person in your stories causes the problem? . . . .
3. Is there an imbalance of power or an injustice in your stories? . . . .
4. Is there loss in your stories or are there needs not met? . . . .
5. Is anyone being evaluated in your stories? . . . .
6. Is there deception in your stories? . . . .
7. Do your stories tend to take place in any particular type of setting? . . . .
8. Do you have any particular physical or emotional vulnerability at the start of any of your stories or in the background? . . . .
9. Are you active or passive in your stories? . . . .

These questions are meant to help you dig up the essential pieces of past emotional scenarios that easily upset your emotional balance. These kinds of stories usually show some degree of variability. But your answers might help you to discover early warning signs of emotional vulnerability.

First of all, the cast of characters in these stories often relate to early family situations. Triangles leading to jealousy and competition often derive from difficulty with siblings or intense relationships with both parents. If that occurs in many of your stories, be alert to any situation with two interconnected relationships. If you were cast in an uncomfortable role in your family, you might watch out for anxieties in group situations. If you have problems only with your closest relationship, look for connections in your history with the person who was your main caregiver.

The emotional themes of your stories also give you information about the types of interpersonal situations you need to watch out for. When you consistently feel guilty or to blame, you probably suffer more when people are dependent on you rather than when you need others. If you notice problems with domination or humiliation, be alert in any setting in which there is a hierarchy. If you feel easily disappointed, keep tabs on your expectations for the responses you want to get from other people.

You can also take note of the context of any situations that are difficult. Some problems occur only in intimate settings and some might occur only at work or in public situations. Your condition affects every setting, and if you have background vulnerabilities, you should be as alert as is possible all of the time. For instance, we all do worse when we're tired. If you know you haven't had enough rest, you can expect a lowered threshold of emotional resilience. If you are in an unfamiliar situation or have suffered a loss, you can know that you will be generally sensitive for some time.

Chapter 8 will address the factors that have an impact on your emotional baseline and discuss how to optimally maintain that baseline, but for the moment the awareness of your emotional background and history can be an aid in predicting your emotional status.

Now, with all of the information you've collected from examining your stories, you can use the space below to summarize your emotional triggers. If you had to boil your statement down to something abstract, would it look like a diagram, a formula, a caution, a warning, or a list of types of people? Use this space to show the most essential, succinct warning you can give yourself.

TO AVOID BEING EMOTIONALLY OVERWHELMED, WATCH OUT FOR . . .

As much as you learn to understand the variables that contribute to your emotional triggers, you'll never be able to recognize all of them or prevent yourself from being affected by them. Still, what you know about your typical reactions increases your awareness. Any knowledge is useful and self-protective, and just the act of looking for patterns in this manner can defy the sense of living in a world of emotional chaos.

EMOTIONAL CLARITY

The phrase "emotional clarity" is almost a contradiction in terms. But even if it is an impossible ideal, you will have moved much closer to it by working through the exercises of this guided journal so far. You've worked with emotions as concepts and as forces you can evaluate and even predict. You've searched for your own emotional patterns and zeroed in on the development and current indicators of your problem zones. Now it's time to actively get to work with those feelings.

• CHAPTER 4 •

Release!

This chapter of your guided journal is about releasing emotions. In it you'll learn what it means to release an emotion and how writing can help you do that. *Release* can be understood as the endpoint of the natural progression of a feeling as it develops and resolves over time. Blocked or stuck emotions get stopped in that progression. In this chapter, you'll develop strategies for knowing when and how to move yourself from being emotionally blocked to being able to comfortably release your emotions.

DEFINING RELEASE

Emotions follow a typical course of physical events, beginning with a sensory stimulation and ending with the body returning to its baseline, or normal state; that is, where it was before the emotional reaction began. In these terms, release might mean the last bit of energy spent before all body states return to normal levels. If this physical sequence itself is defined as the course of an emotion, you could say emotions can take place in the absence of any consciousness.

Some scientists do examine emotional processes separate from conscious experiences. It is true that many reactions, such as reflexes or changes in heart rate or breathing, do occur in response to feelings without requiring any thought processes to be involved at all (LeDoux 2002). Clearly, we frequently have physical reactions to feelings before our thought processes start up, as when we jump without registering what startled us or we have a sinking sensation before we understand that something really disappointing has happened.

But in this book, release is meant in a broader sense. For release to give you a sense of resolution and relief, the physical process must be accompanied by acknowledgment of the feeling. Acknowledgment of a feeling means that for at least an instant, you can feel the emotion and be mentally aware that you are feeling it. Acknowledgment is the simple statement "Right now I feel this." The sense of release requires some physical action, even something as subtle as a sigh, plus the acknowledgment of the feeling.

In my practice, I've observed that feelings not consciously acknowledged and felt do tend to go around in repetitive circles instead of getting released and allowing room for other feelings to arise. People act on their feelings all the time but they can still feel trapped by those same feelings when they haven't really registered. An angry person can go to the gym and exercise for hours fueled by rage. At the end of the workout, the person may be drained of physical energy and feel quite different, but the rage below the surface may be easily reignited and quickly resurface unless it's been consciously acknowledged.

The converse is also true. Acknowledgment of feelings by itself doesn't entirely equate with release. However, when you can name the feeling you are experiencing, it is a powerful moment. The instant of facing the feeling, and knowing that you can face it, seems to deflate the threat of the feeling. In a way, you desensitize yourself to the feeling, and in a way you conquer it when you can allow yourself to feel it and to know it.

The idea of releasing an emotion is a bit artificial. It's not as if the feeling flies away like a bug from a jar when the lid is removed. Like radiation, emotions seem to have "half-lives." Each time you release a feeling, it's like you get rid of half of it, so that it keeps getting smaller, and each step keeps becoming less intense, but some tiny bit never goes away. The skills of release that you will develop from working with this book help the process along, even if they don't lead to an absolute and conclusive end of a feeling.

EMOTIONAL RELEASE: SARA'S STORY

Remember Sara from the introduction and chapter 1? Her story can serve as a useful illustration of these abstract ideas. In the introduction, Sara's behavior provided a good example of emotional blockage because she got stuck in her intense feelings about the significance of a chance coincidence. She romanticized the event and longed to meet the man she had seen on the train once again. In chapter 1, when Sara had learned some emotion management skills, she moved through the progression of her feelings smoothly. Comparing the stories demonstrates the difference between being stuck emotionally and being able to bring about an emotional release.

The Physical Process

The initial stimulus for Sara's reaction was the man on the train. Sara first saw him and then felt him sit down beside her. Then she saw the book he was reading was the same as the book that she was reading. Immediately, the sensory receptors in her brain connected with other brain circuits that set off anxiety circuits in the emotional processing part of her brain. An associated series of images and thoughts were triggered in the synthesizing part of her brain. These processes are all quick and incredibly complex because there are also connections and feedback loops taking place between all of the processes at the same time (LeDoux 2002).

The neurons in Sara's brain sent signals to other body systems that regulate breathing, circulation, hormones, and so forth, and all of these physiological changes caused Sara to feel very differently than she had felt before she saw the man with the book. She started breathing faster and sweating. Her heart rate went up, she became stimulated sexually, and the blood vessels in her digestive system dilated. Her body was mobilized for action, but there was no action she could take; she was trapped sitting on the train.

When Sara realized how anxious she had become, she purposefully tried to reverse some of her physical reactions. She looked away from the man and his book, took deep breaths, and distracted herself mentally. Her feedback systems started to reverse and to signal a return to her baseline body states. But Sara was still pretty worked up and once she was off the train, she kept revisiting her intense feelings.

The Broader Process

In the first version of the story, when Sara had very few emotion management skills, her anxiety was restimulated constantly throughout her day as she replayed the whole sequence over and over in her mind. A complete emotional release from anxiety did not come about until Sara identified the feeling at its base when she wrote about it. When she wrote about what she was feeling, she realized that she was still anxious and understood many of the underlying reasons for her anxiety. She had acknowledged the core feeling. At that point, she felt a sense of completion and some movement in the feeling. She was able to store the memory in an organized way, and to refocus her thinking.

When she made the decision to have dinner with her friend, she reinforced her newly calm state. She may move on to feeling elated by some news her friend will give her over dinner, or she may become frustrated with her boss or something else, but those will be new emotions following their own courses.

WRITING AS RELEASE

Writing in journals, whether it's once in a while or very regular journaling, releases emotions almost magically. Sometimes feelings seem to flow from within our bodies right onto the paper. The instant you lift the point of your pen or pencil from the page, the paper seems to contain the feeling. As you write, you unleash, unearth, describe, dissect, and divert. Journals get your feelings out and give them a place to go.

The Physical Act of Writing

Journal writing works so well to release feelings because it combines a physical act with the acknowledgment of the feeling. You might not think of writing as a very physical element of emotional release. The action of writing is not like a hard workout in the gym or giving someone a huge hug to express joy. But for many people there can be something relieving or soothing in the physical act of writing.

Exercise 12 tries to isolate the physical act of writing to give you a feel for the physical component of writing as release. For one minute, you are going to experience the action of writing without content. Put a clock or watch nearby to glance at, or use a timer. Use your regular writing implement and spend one minute making the motions of writing without forming a single letter. Try to capture your pace and rhythm, the general size and style of your handwriting, but just make senseless marks instead of words. If you are at a keyboard, just tap keys randomly and rhythmically. You might try turning off the computer screen. A minute can actually feel like a long time when you do this, but it should be enough time to give you a feel for the physical act of writing by itself.

EXERCISE 12

The Physical Act of Writing

Writing Helps You to Acknowledge Your Feelings

Exercise 12 focused on the most physical aspect of the writing process. At the other end of emotional release, writing is a natural tool for acknowledging feelings. Sometimes writing brings up surprising discoveries. We uncover buried feelings and bring them to the light of day. In a contrary way, sometimes it liberates us from feelings we know all too well, and writing helps us to stop being so aware of them. Exercises 13 and 14 are about these two types of emotional release that journaling can provide: (1) uncovering your buried emotions and (2) liberating yourself from the constant repetition of old, stale emotional states.

Exercise 13 demonstrates an opening up or expanding type of release, where a very loose style brings extra freedom to the written material. This allows feelings to rise up to the surface that you might not have been thinking about at all. Exercise 14 is an example of a purging kind of release where writing and symbolic destruction are used to get rid of an unwanted feeling.

Allowing Your Feelings to Flow through Writing

Exercise 13 introduces a style or technique of writing called "stream of consciousness." Working in this style, you relax so much into the immediate process that you write without stopping and, more importantly, without making any decisions or evaluations. Stream of consciousness writing has been used for a long time as a technique to provide emotional release, as well as to gain emotional awareness, insight, and even literary skill.

Some feelings exist in a "preconscious" state; that is, you recognize that you feel them when they are brought up and named, but you have not yet focused on them. Such preconscious feelings bubble up easily in stream of consciousness writing. For example, I've heard several people say they didn't realize how sad they were until they actually saw their tears falling on the paper as they wrote. Writing helps to uncover hidden, or subterranean, emotions, and becoming aware of such preconscious feelings relieves your mind. Uncovered feelings can be acknowledged, and acknowledged feelings can be released.

When learning how to do stream of consciousness writing, as with many relaxation skills, you may find it is harder to learn *not* to do something than it is to learn how to do it. With this style of writing you try to not plan, not criticize, not edit, and, especially, not stop. You don't worry about grammar, punctuation, spelling, syntax, or any other language rules.

The only instruction is to write continuously for a fixed period of time. Never take your pen or pencil off the page, and try to allow your thoughts and feelings to flow freely. The same instruction applies if you are using a keyboard. Just keep typing the words as they occur to you, and don't stop. Visualizing a stream of water literally flowing through a natural setting can help. My favorite instructions for

this type of writing come from Tristine Rainer's *The New Diary* (1978, 43): "Write fast, write everything, include everything, write from your feelings, write from your body, accept whatever comes." That sums it up beautifully.

If you haven't written in this way previously, remember this first experience of writing in a stream of consciousness mode just opens up the process. The more you write this way, the easier and more enjoyable it becomes. You can't make any mistakes. There's nothing you can do wrong. So, try it a few times and see how it develops.

Go somewhere quiet and protected from intrusion. It is helpful if your surrounding environment is pleasing. You should be seated comfortably, have something nice to look at around you, have quiet or soothing sounds in the background, and be using writing materials you like. Start with five minutes of writing. Shake out your hand if it starts to cramp; very few people are used to writing continuously for five minutes. Have an easy way to check on the time. When you are used to this method, you can try writing for longer periods. Take three deep breaths. Then just write.

EXERCISE 13

Stream of Consciousness

After writing for five minutes, get up and move away from your writing place. Walk around the room and stretch or step outside for a minute, and then take a look at your stream of consciousness writing. Do you notice anything surprising? Have you felt any change in yourself since you started and finished your writing? Stream of consciousness writing can help if you feel emotionally stuck, and it keeps your feelings limber when you do it regularly. Try to set aside specific time or a separate notebook to practice and experiment with this style of writing. It will become more and more illuminating.

Letting Go of Feelings through Writing

Journals are also great for reaching a pure catharsis of your feelings because they allow you to discharge, vent, and spew any and all of your negative feelings. By providing this safe space, journals have spared many relationships from unproductive interactions. A journal allows pure emotional expression but no one has to listen to or absorb your feelings. Sometimes just writing down a feeling relieves pressure. On paper, you can be as nasty, vehement, unfair, and overblown as you choose to be and no one will be the worse for it.

Exercise 14 is a kind of exorcism. Most people find it to be one of the more fun exercises to do, and everyone finds it interesting. In this exercise you are going to fully acknowledge and then physically release your worst feeling.

In the space provided on the following page, write about the emotion you most hate to feel. Write loosely and fill the space with descriptions of what this feeling is like, who it is directed toward, and what causes you to feel it. You can be as awful as you want to be, because when you are done, you are going to rip this page out and destroy it.

EXERCISE 14

Release Bad Feelings

It might be interesting to contrast your experience of writing this page with Exercise 12, where you isolated the physical action of writing. You can feel how much more powerful the release you get is with the combination of the physical act and the very conscious acknowledgment of the feeling.

Once you've released your terrible feeling, tear the page out of the book. (If you choose to return to this exercise, you can always use a fresh piece of paper). Turn destroying the page into a project. Several methods are recommended, so pick one that appeals to you and adds to your sense of the symbolism of this release. Some people like to shred the page. Others like to wad the paper up very tightly and toss it into the trash. Both fire and water are very effective. You can burn the page somewhere safe or run water over it to make the ink run and the paper disintegrate. I once led a journal workshop where the participants burned their pages, and they enjoyed the release so much that they proceeded to mash the ashes with a spoon and then flush them down the toilet. Sometimes it is fun to imagine your terrible feelings being destroyed along with the paper that portrayed them.

BLOCKED FEELINGS

A *blocked feeling* is an emotional process that has been stopped in its natural course, like a spring that is released in a box that's too small to allow the spring to fully unwind. There's some tension left in the spring and some force exerted by the surface of the box against the spring's tension. Those two forces will cancel each other out until the box is opened. If the force of the spring is like an unreleased emotion, and the box is like the energy you spend keeping that emotion buried, the net result is wasted energy.

How Do Feelings Become Blocked?

The process of blocking feelings can be completely automatic, without any thought involved at all, or it can be a very willful conscious process. In psychological terminology, *repression* is the unconscious automatic process of blocking a feeling as a way to manage emotional conflict, and *suppression* refers to the purposeful denial and forgetting of a feeling. Suppression can be likened to taking a detour on a highway, and repression is more like the road is blocked by an accident.

Exercises 13 and 14 showed you was to remedy each of these blocking processes. Exercise 13, stream of consciousness writing, works well against repression because it allows buried feelings to surface spontaneously. Exercise 14, releasing bad feelings, is helpful with suppressed feelings because you begin with a conscious awareness of what it is you wish to rid yourself of. You can purposefully release a bad feeling instead of purposefully burying it.

Why Do Feelings Become Blocked?

We block emotions for reasons that help us to adapt both biologically and emotionally. Sometimes blocking emotions conserves necessary physical and mental resources for actions involved in survival issues or to make good decisions. Also, blocking emotions allows us to pace ourselves while experiencing them, which keeps us from being flooded with strong feelings. This is a very important value of blocking emotions. If we didn't have this capacity, we could be devastated emotionally before we knew what was happening to us, or why. But blocked feelings become destructive when they accumulate or are held inside for too long. They also can be harmful if you are completely unaware of them. Blocked emotions can pop out in unpredictable or self-destructive behavior.

What Happens When Feelings Are Blocked?

Releasing blocked feelings is so important because they can be harmful in physical and emotional ways. The theory that buried emotions cause psychological symptoms and that release of those emotions resolves the symptoms was first stated by Sigmund Freud in the early twentieth century (Breuer and Freud 1955). He was the first person to explain how so many mental processes that go on outside of our awareness still have profound effects on our behaviors. Eventually, what is buried will have its say. The energy or feeling may be displaced, but it will reveal itself in an indirect way that can range from a slip of the tongue to hysterical paralysis; that is, paralysis with no known physical cause (Freud 1957).

More recent research continues to support the concept that burying your feelings has a real cost. Muraven and Baumeister (2000) summed up these studies with their conclusion that the effort to suppress feelings costs people measurable energy. When research subjects were asked to exert self-control in regulating their negative feelings, they demonstrated losses in their physical and mental stamina. Suppression has been linked to many other physical deficits, from problems in immune system functions (Petrie, Booth, and Pennebaker 1998) to a slower recovery from pain (Cioffi and Holloway 1993).

James Pennebaker's research (2004) demonstrates an even more direct link between blocked feelings and illness. In his research, a history of trauma was related to increased use of medical services. Among a group of people who had traumatic histories, those with undisclosed, or unexpressed, trauma visited their doctors for sickness 40 percent more often than those who had written about their traumas. Conversely, those people who wrote about their traumatic experiences visited doctors 43 percent fewer times than those who wrote only about superficial topics.

Scientific research backs up common sense once again, and it definitely backs up what I see as a clinical therapist. People consistently express a sense of being freed and more focused on their goals after facing their difficult feelings. Sometimes it's truly inspiring to see the power of emotional release. It is not

necessarily dramatic and results are often not immediate, but there is no replacement for the true experience and release of a feeling.

EARLY CUES OF BLOCKED EMOTIONS

Since emotional blocking can be useful and even necessary sometimes, understanding more about it doesn't necessarily lead to completely eliminating the blocking processes. The best you can do is to release emotions when you can, and when you can't, to use blocking processes productively. Chapter 5 addresses the balancing act between release and blocking, but the point to remember here is that blocking has its place. Your goal is to roughly monitor the process—to learn to recognize when you're engaged in blocking, and not to do it too often or for too long.

Of course, the main problem with identifying emotional blockage is that, by definition, you don't notice when you're blocked. Although you can't observe the intangible process of blocking itself, you can learn to recognize secondary signs or by-products of blockages occurring during the progression of a feeling. You can learn to identify the personal cues that indicate you are either feeling the internal tension of a specific blocked emotion or engaging in behaviors you typically use to help you block emotions. For example, once you know that you always switch on the TV to avoid feeling upset, you can use the TV as the signal to ask yourself whether you might get more benefit from using an emotional release technique instead of zoning out in front of the television.

Knowing your typical emotional triggers, such as those you described in chapter 3, is also important. If you know something that usually sets you off just took place and you're not feeling it, you can ask yourself whether the feeling is trapped somewhere inside you and be alert to it. In Exercise 15, you will look more closely at your own process of blocking feelings. First, though, it might help to know more about typical cues for blocked feelings. For most people, signs of emotional blockage usually fall in one of the following four categories:

- Unexplained physical symptoms, usually mild and diffuse, such as headache, fatigue, stomachache, joint pain, breathing discomfort, itching, or skin irritations
- Compulsive activities such as driven and excessive eating, self-grooming, housecleaning, planning and scheduling, crossword puzzles, sexual activities, or exercise
- Mindless numbing activities such as overuse or abuse of drugs, alcohol, or cigarettes, or more than about an hour daily of television, video games, or unfocused Internet surfing

- Complaints from other people about you being emotionally inaccessible, not communicating, or communicating indirectly through passive-aggressive behaviors like being late, forgetful, or having a generally withdrawn attitude

Many of these categories and cues overlap, and all of these observations are not necessarily indications of blocked emotions, but they are cues of blocked emotions for many people, and you will probably relate to some specific cues or to one particular category.

Exercise 15 is a flowchart meant to give you some idea of your typical process of blocking feelings and an idea for a different outcome of this process. Just fill in each step of the sequence with the information relevant to your own emotions and behaviors. Each step has directions plus prompts to give you ideas of where to look for information.

EXERCISE 15

Identifying Cues for Your Blocked Feelings

List the feelings that you are most likely to block (Look back at Exercises 2, 9, 14, and especially 10 and 11 if you need some ideas):

. . . .

. . . .

. . . .

↓

List the activities or behaviors you are likely to do first when you want to block a feeling (Look at the preceding bullet list for typical cues or signs of blocked emotions):

. . . .

. . . .

. . . .

↓

List other activities or cues you might resort to (Look back to the bullet list of cues of blocked emotions):

. . . .

. . . .

. . . .

↓

List concrete details as signals of blocked emotions. (Look at the cues you've listed and translate them into observable details to use as your signals. For example, if you use obsessive housekeeping to block your feelings, your detail might be the vacuum cleaner. If you smoke cigarettes when you're blocking feelings, the pack of cigarettes is the detail. This takes your cues further because you may be more likely to notice an observable detail than to watch for a behavior):

. . . .

. . . .

. . . .

↓

List ideas for alternative behaviors. (You may have some ideas for alternative behaviors you could perform when you are blocking feelings from behaviors you've practiced in the past that you know are calming for you. Or you may get ideas from the exercises in this chapter. If you don't have any ideas, dog-ear this page and return to it when you are done with the book, because the remaining chapters all have ideas for alternatives to blocking feelings):

. . . .

. . . .

. . . .

Using Your Early Cues

Exercise 15 should give you some ideas about the behaviors you use when you are blocking feelings and which cues are most easily observed. Thinking

through the sequence of events and the exact details of your cues makes it more likely that you'll recognize the process or the cues quickly. The earlier you catch the blocking, the easier it is to address the underlying issues or feelings.

If you have a tendency to get backlogged emotionally, you can benefit from regular journal writing or regular checking up on yourself. You can review your emotional state when you are brushing your teeth or doing some other regular activity. You can also try keeping a notebook by your bed and writing a quick list or a paragraph before going to sleep about your dominant feelings during the day. To make this task more interesting, after a week, switch times and write about the previous day's emotional themes first thing in the morning. You might think that your memory of the prior day will be weaker after a night's sleep, but often the opposite is true. You may wake up with a sharp focus that you lose as the day progresses.

EMOTIONAL RELEASE AND HEALTH

Every day provides plenty of emotional conflict and complications to contend with. Knowing how and when to release your emotions makes the ongoing experience of feelings less threatening and easier to cope with. It can be a relief to know you're not stuck with having to contain every feeling you have for an indefinite amount of time. When you release an emotion instead of holding on to it, you open up the space in your body and mind to feel other emotions and to feel greater awareness and wholeness as a person.

Stress reduction begins with seeing your feelings as a continually changing process, not as an immovable or overwhelming burden inside you. From there, everything will become easier on your mind and body.

• CHAPTER 5 •

Refocus!

This chapter introduces you to calming and distracting strategies to use when your emotions become overwhelming. These techniques use your senses, your body, and your thought processes to put the brakes on your feelings. They help you regain your focus when intense emotion throws you off balance. These abilities are the crucial skills needed to regain your emotional equilibrium. They are central to emotion management because you can't make choices until you refocus, and if you can make a balanced decision, you're still in the game and still working toward the goals that really matter to you.

As you did with the skills needed for emotional release, you'll first consider what it means to refocus and then you'll try out a few ways to do it. You'll use writing to learn how to refocus and as a way to soothe yourself. At the end of this chapter, you will also have a sense of knowing when you need to use refocusing skills.

Your repertoire of emotion management skills is really taking shape now. You've practiced different ways to step away from your emotions and define them. You've learned how and when to release your feelings. The skills involved in refocusing will complement your new skills in releasing emotions.

The skills involved in refocusing also open other possibilities for further emotion management. Once you can calm down and redirect yourself, you can collect your thoughts on the situation that is challenging you emotionally. You can do damage control when your feelings have caused problems and you can work on maintaining an optimal experience of your emotions.

RELEASE VS. REFOCUS

You might think that these ideas about refocusing contradict all the work you've done on releasing your feelings and letting them run their course. You're right. It really is contradictory. In some ways, chapter 4, Release! and chapter 5, Refocus! are like volume controls that go up and down. You can't set the volume unless it's possible to move in both directions. Sometimes you'll need to use one set of skills more than the other, and most people tend to need one set of skills most of the time.

But releasing and refocusing aren't just simple opposites. It's never an either-or proposition with emotions. If you tend to be emotionally volatile, you need to learn how to refocus in order to settle down. But explosive emotions are exactly the feelings you may have blocked too thoroughly or for too long, and they eventually erupt. Understanding emotional release and the natural course of feelings could even things out for an emotionally volatile person.

On the other hand, if you tend to repress or suppress your emotions, the release exercises are crucial for keeping your feelings flowing more naturally. However, to have the necessary confidence to release your feelings, you might need additional skills to get back in balance when you're feeling overwhelmed. Your emotions wouldn't be blocked if there wasn't something potentially overwhelming about them in the first place. The processes of releasing and refocusing reinforce each other. The whole range of skills found in these two chapters is necessary for balance and emotional confidence.

WHAT IS REFOCUSING?

If you've ever been told to count to ten before doing or saying something when you're upset, then the concept of refocusing is familiar to you. Counting to ten absorbs your mind and buys you a little time. Those two things might calm you before you do something you would regret later because of your strong feelings.

Recent brain research has demonstrated one way that the act of refocusing can interrupt the progression of an emotion. The amygdala, located centrally in the brain, is the brain's basic emotional reactor system. Sensory signals can go straight to the amygdala, where emotional circuits are fired and connect directly to body systems that regulate arousal and movement.

The prefrontal cortex, located in the front of the brain, is on the opposite end of human brain functioning. It temporarily stores information from different domains, integrates, and processes this "working memory" to make plans and decisions.

The amygdala and the prefrontal cortex cannot both be active at the same time (LeDoux 2002). Emotional reactions and complex reasoning balance against each other in the brain, like two weights on a seesaw. If you engage the more intellectual part of your brain, that is, your prefrontal cortex, your emotions will quiet

down. This is the physical explanation for the common sense behind counting to ten when you're upset.

The word "upset" can mean emotionally disturbed but it also can mean turned over. Strong feelings can overturn and affect your judgment because they dominate your experience and temporarily erase everything else you might feel, think, or want. Refocusing means regaining your equilibrium, at least to the extent that you can remember those other aspects of yourself.

In addition to all that, refocusing is essential because really strong feelings can feel terrible. It's painful to feel lost and helpless because you can't see past your feelings. You can feel swallowed up by your own emotions. The calming quality of refocusing comes from reclaiming yourself from that level of confusion.

Refocusing can be a momentary process, such as counting to ten or taking some deep breaths. You might pause to realign your mental processes, and then continue to feel the emotion, like putting down some heavy suitcases to shake out your arms and then picking the suitcases up again. Refocusing also can be more like the process of suppression, where you make a choice to stop feeling temporarily. In that case, it's important to make note of the feeling and to be aware of your choice. Refocusing might mean deciding to write about the emotional event that night or deciding to work on changing the situation so that it is less likely to recur. By becoming aware and taking some action to handle the feeling, you can prevent your refocusing efforts from turning into a long-term blocking of emotions.

WAYS TO REFOCUS

You will work with three general ways to refocus from strong feelings: (1) using your senses to become absorbed or to soothe yourself, (2) using relaxing body processes like breathing, and (3) engaging in more positive intellectual processes. Writing provides an avenue for all three of these methods. You can write about what your senses perceive, you can use writing to physically relax, and you definitely engage your thought processes when you write. The exercises that work best for you will show you which method helps you to refocus most naturally.

SENSORY FOCUS

If you can observe what you perceive with your senses—what you see, hear, touch, smell, or taste—you will not be able to stay caught or totally involved in a feeling. The complex richness of the entire world is always available for your attention. It's easy to forget to look at the world around you, to see what the sky is like or to notice the air and smells and sounds that you're used to perceiving. Exercise 16 will help you to develop your sensory focus by making you aware of your immediate sensory environment in both obvious and novel ways.

EXERCISE 16

Immediate Sensory Focus

Briefly describe the following aspects of your sensory experience right here, right now.

The quality of the light:

Background noises:

Weight distribution and position of your body:

Elements of atmosphere, such as air movement and density, moisture level:

Brightest color in your line of vision:

Textures of your clothing:

Anything you can smell:

Temperature of the air relative to the temperature of your skin:

Shadows or reflections in your line of vision:

Taste in your mouth: . . . .

. . . .

Your size relative to the space you're occupying: . . . .

. . . .

What you see out of focus or in your peripheral vision: . . . .

. . . .

The easiest way to refocus is the most direct. When your emotions are rising, try to observe the details of the present moment. Use all of your senses in the freshest and most inventive ways you can. This will decrease the intensity of your emotions and is likely to occupy your mind and slow down your physical processes too. You can't help but regain some perspective when you carefully pay attention to your environment and your place in it.

Sensory Focus and Soothing

Paying attention to your senses not only moves you out of your emotional upset, but it can be a soothing experience in itself. This is not the only way to be soothed, but it runs the deepest because our first comforts in life were based on our senses. As infants, we helplessly awaited the feeling of being held, the sight of a familiar face, or the tone of a caring voice. Now, if we know exactly what is soothing to us, we can easily comfort ourselves.

Exercise 17 points out possibilities for soothing. You will repeat the list of sensory observations from Exercise 16, but this time, instead of focusing on the moment, you will create a "best of . . ." list. For each category, you will describe your ideal of that particular sensory experience. Think about what would be your favorite qualities in each category. What would be the most pleasant and calming focus you can imagine for each of your senses?

EXERCISE 17

Soothing Sensory Focus

Describe your ideal of a soothing sensory impression for each category.

The quality of the light: . . . .

. . . .

Background noises: . . . .

. . . .

Weight distribution and position of your body: . . . .

. . . .

Elements of atmosphere, such as air movement and density, moisture level:

. . . .

Brightest color in your line of vision: . . . .

. . . .

Textures of your clothing: . . . .

. . . .

Anything you can smell: . . . .

. . . .

Temperature of the air relative to the temperature of your skin: . . . .

. . . .

Shadows or reflections in your line of vision: . . . .

. . . .

Taste in your mouth: . . . .

. . . .

Your size relative to the space you're occupying: . . . .

. . . .

What you see out of focus or in your peripheral vision: . . . .

. . . .

Your list of sensory comforts can be very helpful in times of despair or emotional overload. There are many ways you can use this list and some of these are discussed below.

Be aware. First of all, watch out for those times when you spontaneously encounter the sights, smells, sounds, tastes and tactile sensations that are comforting to you. If you love morning light, pay attention to it for a few moments when you get up in the morning. If you love a light breeze, close your eyes and soak up the experience the next time one blows by. One good way to stay soothed is to be aware of your surroundings and to receive what is given. It's also true that the more you're aware of soothing sensory experiences, the more often they seem to appear.

Carry a token of sensory comfort. Another use for your list is for direction in creating a portable, concrete token of sensory comfort. This token should be small enough to put into your wallet, but it should be an actual sample of a soothing experience, to represent basic sensory comfort. Some examples might be a beautiful picture, a square of velvet, a perfumed piece of cloth, a note to yourself, a small magnifying glass, a feather, a measure of musical notations, a piece of candy (remember to replace consumable tokens), or a small bag of sand.

To find an idea to create your own token, look at your list again and number your first, second, and third choices for your favorite soothing sensations. Put a checkmark beside those items that are easily obtained. A beautiful sheet of blue origami paper is definitely easier to find and carry with you than the sound of the wind through palm trees. Look for the place that your favorite choices and your checkmarks overlap, and that should help you to create a personal token as a symbol of soothing comfort.

In trying emotional times, your token of sensory comfort will help you to refocus because of a unique characteristic: it's real. Sometimes none of our strategies is as powerful as something we physically experience. Your token, like a journal, has the power to come to you from the outside, but it starts from deep within

yourself. It can provide a backup focus when your mental focus wavers. Take the time now to make a comfort token for yourself and put it where you can get it easily or make a specific plan to do so soon.

Sensory soothing and imagination. The final way you can use your list of sensory comforts is in the realm of your imagination. You can use the list to imagine a scene that incorporates as many of your favorite soothing sensations as possible. This is a personally tailored creative visualization. When people imagine particularly soothing landscapes, often these scenes are composed of elements of their personal sensory comforts. For example, beaches are good for people soothed by warmth and softness; mountains are soothing to people who are comforted by clear lines, vivid colors, and freshness.

Review your list, especially your top choices. Imagine yourself in a scene that provides as many of your comforting sensations as possible. Your scene might be an awe-inspiring landscape, but remember it can also be something simple, like being in a cozy bed on a rainy day, floating in cool water, or sitting on a stool in a warm kitchen where bread is baking. Embellish the scene in your mind with as many details as you can think of that will please your senses.

For Exercise 18, write a description of your soothing scene with all the details that you imagined. At the top of the page, write three words or short phrases naming your top three sensory comforts from Exercise 17. Then start writing about the scene you imagined. As you write, your scene may become more elaborate or evolve into a different form than you expect. Allow it to spin out from the starting point of what soothes you.

EXERCISE 18

The Soothing Scene

My top three sensory comforts:

1. ....

2. ....

3. ....

My comforting scene: ....

Exercise 18 gives you another way to use your senses and your writing to comfort yourself and to refocus. The ability to self-soothe starts to develop once you have the ability to imagine. Like many emotion management skills, a very basic ability—imagination—when dug up, dusted off, and placed within reach, can become very useful.

PHYSICAL FOCUS

Strong emotions make us feel diffused and scattered. When you focus on your physical sensations, you collect your energy inward, which is quite different from the outward, external type of calming you get with a sensory focus. Being very aware of yourself as a body has a grounding and centering effect.

Physical Calming

Strong feelings usually rev up body systems like heart rate, respiration, and skin conductivity. Simple techniques for focusing on these inner physical events can slow down these body systems. All of these systems interact, so relaxation in any part of the system has a general benefit.

The easiest physical focus to concentrate on is breathing. If you feel as if your body systems are racing because of emotional overload, taking deep breaths helps physically and calms in a rhythmic, soothing way. You can also try taking your pulse. When you take your pulse, you will become distracted by counting your heartbeats and you can get caught up in that rhythm, too. Muscle tension in voluntary or skeletal muscles can be released by stretching, shaking, or rubbing them, or by just changing your position.

Physical Focus and Writing

Writing and relaxation exercises also complement each other. Many writers incorporate relaxation techniques into their writing routines. Sometimes physical relaxation before writing helps you to let go of useless trivia before you start. Your writing goes deeper and gets closer to the important points.

Try deep breathing, stretching, or a form of meditation before you open your journal, and observe how it affects what you write. Stretching is especially useful because sitting and writing for a long time can knot up your muscles. Another simple practice is to take a certain number of breaths before you write and carefully observe the air moving in and out as you inhale and exhale.

Exercise 19 incorporates an aspect of a relaxation technique with journal writing. It will help you write your way to being focused physically by using breathing in an odd way. In this exercise, you will write a page in a continuous, loose, and informal manner like stream of consciousness writing. But on this page, you will write only when you are exhaling. While you inhale, lightly hold your pen or pencil to the page or position your fingers above the keyboard, then let the words burst through when you exhale. The experience can be strange and pretty choppy. But you will become absorbed in your breathing and your writing will slow it down. By the end of the page, you are likely to be calmer and more focused physically.

EXERCISE 19

Breathing into Writing

You may never choose to write a complete journal-on-the-exhale, but it is interesting to experience the combination of writing and inward physical focus. This is another way to reinforce the idea that you can modulate some of the physical aspects of emotions.

THOUGHT FOCUS

Sometimes painful feelings are connected to a barrage of negative thoughts. If you can reverse the direction of those thoughts by becoming absorbed in constructive thoughts, you will be focusing mentally and reducing the intense negativity you may be feeling.

Thought Focus and Writing

In Exercise 3, you developed a positive emotional reference point in order to have a memory available to counteract hopelessness. Exercise 20 is a condensed version of that process. It's also based on the idea of rehearsal. If you have a defense prepared before your negative feelings mushroom, you'll be quicker to fight the process.

Exercise 20 reinforces a positive thought much in the same way that a mantra does. First look for a thought that holds your attention and feels uplifting without being trite or making you want to roll your eyes. A line from a song sometimes works, or just a phrase that describes something you like. You might use your soothing sensory focus for an idea, or name a goal, or even make a pun.

Here are some ideas to consider: Light leaves against darker gray skies. I have what I need. Security, honesty, time for tea. My emotions are working for me. I love to write in a cozy room. The sound of waves gently breaking. If in doubt, take a break. More than this, there is nothing. 100 percent pure maple syrup.

EXERCISE 20

Positive Thought

Write your positive thought twelve times to reinforce it in your mind. Try to write slowly.

1. ....
2. ....
3. ....
4. ....
5. ....
6. ....
7. ....
8. ....
9. ....
10. ....
11. ....
12. ....

Hopefully, this repetition reinforced your thought and didn't feel punishing. Sometimes the part can substitute for the whole and this small thought can represent a sense of calm and mastery when your emotions are painful.

WHICH FOCUS IS THE BEST FOR YOU?

You've tried three modes of focus with writing: sensory focus, physical focus, and thought focus. Which works best for you is a question of your own style and makeup. But each of the three modes for refocusing has its own quality that might apply in different situations. Sensory focus is like anchoring; it helps if you feel engulfed by your feelings. Physical focus is more centering; it helps at those times

when your energies seem scattered or you feel a frantic sense of intensity. The thought focus fights negative thoughts that are spiraling out of control. This focus illustrates the soundness of the research on journaling that has proved the benefits of writing are associated with some structure and positive language (Pennebaker 2004).

WHEN TO REFOCUS

Knowing when to refocus is a lot like knowing when to release feelings because part of the problem is the loss of perspective in the first place. You want to refocus when you're losing it emotionally, but you are less likely to think of it when you're overwhelmed. The best you can do is to learn to recognize the earliest possible point when you are in danger of becoming overwhelmed. The signals usually are that some body system speeds up, or your emotions start to feel as though they're filling up your mind, or you feel overstimulated.

Overstimulation means the level of any feeling has gone past your threshold of comfort and tolerance. Your threshold depends on your immediate situation, your physical reactivity, and what you've learned about an acceptable intensity of feelings. Being overstimulated shuts down your mental and physical controls. You can't think straight and you might shake, blush, or freeze up. Even though you can be overstimulated by positive feelings as well as painful ones, it's always uncomfortable. When you recognize the approach of overstimulation, it's a signal that you need to refocus.

It is the nature of emotions, however, to sometimes catch you off guard. Sometimes you can't think to think, and can't refocus until the emotional waters have receded a little. At those times your signal is the first instant that you consciously notice that you have been over the edge. You need to give yourself a break then and be appreciative of however quickly you were able to refocus yourself.

Once you're past the sense of being flooded and overwhelmed, you can refocus quickly if you've developed your skills and have some life preservers, or ideas, ready to latch onto. The exercises you've done in this chapter provide you with both skills and ideas. Now you can work with your feelings in a more structured and organized way, which you will develop in the next chapter of this guided journal.

• CHAPTER 6 •

Organize!

STRUCTURE, ORGANIZATION, AND EMOTIONS

Organization and emotion are often thought of as mutually exclusive concepts. But they can fit together very productively. Emotions definitely aren't orderly, but they have underlying principles. Having a sense of those principles helps you to manage your feelings in several ways. Structure makes all sorts of problems less daunting. When you have an overall picture, you can break problems into smaller, easier-to-deal-with pieces. Structure helps you to keep your perspective too; having a map in front of you gives you a frame of reference for the scale of your work and for the progress you've made.

Organization helps with understanding emotions and emotions themselves can be very organizing. In therapy, people often expect that only reasoning and logic will help them to understand their lives better. But I consistently see people reason themselves into convoluted circles and tie themselves into logical knots until they feel something. Then, suddenly, everything falls in place. From that point it's easy to see how the emotional system is working and which feelings are at the core of the system. Logic is driven by feeling and ends up supporting what the emotions dictate.

This blending of organization and emotion draws on many themes you've already developed in your writing in this journal. Working on structure uses skills that you've practiced, such as distancing, defining emotions, and clarifying your personal patterns. You'll take all of these elements further in this chapter and

you'll examine some overall systems for organizing your emotions. Armed with these ideas, you'll become an upper-level emotion manager. You'll see the big picture.

SUMMARIES

A summary of any area of knowledge satisfies a basic urge for closure. Whatever is summarized feels known, contained, and settled. We use basic structures such as lists, outlines, flowcharts, and percentage breakdowns to summarize almost anything that is not emotional. In this chapter, you'll apply some of these summarizing techniques to emotions. A well-designed list can help you to navigate through your emotions as much as a grocery list can help you to navigate the aisles of the supermarket.

Lists

Everyone writes lists. They can work in two directions: to get thoughts out of your mind and onto paper when there is too much on your mind, or to reinforce memory and help you maintain your focus on important thoughts. Lists about emotions can be useful in those ways and for figuring things out when your feelings seem too complicated or diffuse to understand. You've used lists in other sections of this journal, such as lists of emotion management skills (see Exercise 1) and lists of cues for blocked feelings (see Exercise 15). In this chapter, for another example of a useful list, you'll write a question list in Exercise 21. This will be a list of questions you have about your own emotions. They can be very personal questions, such as "Why do I always freak out when I see my ex-husband?" or "What relationships in my life bring me the most emotional satisfaction?" Or your questions can be more abstract, such as "What part of the brain controls emotional expression?" or useful, as in "What steps can I take to feel more optimistic when I wake up in the morning?" Now, working with the general topic of your emotions, randomly list anything you wonder about.

EXERCISE 21

Questions I Have about My Emotions

1. ...
2. ...
3. ...
4. ...
5. ...
6. ...
7. ...
8. ...
9. ...
10. ...
11. ...
12. ...
13. ...
14. ...
15. ...
16. ...

Lists of questions open up topics for exploration. This list might remind you of aspects of your emotional life that could use more attention. It might give you ideas to write about in a journal or to research more thoroughly on your own. Or it might give you novel ideas because you may have written questions you hadn't considered before. Sometimes even random thoughts can yield insight.

Lists are great for brainstorming and loosening up your ideas. Experiment with a few lists on your own at different times. Perhaps you could try some spontaneous lists based on "What I'm Feeling Right Now" at different times in the day. Or explore other emotional topics with lists like these: "Beliefs I've Discarded," "Things That Scare Me," "My Favorite Compliments to Receive," "My Most Hated Insults to Hear" or "Famous People I Identify With (and Why)."

If making your list feels useful, you can take it even further as an organizing tool. You can convert a list to an outline by choosing some of the most important items and then breaking them down further into areas to investigate.

If you see sequencing in some of the items, your list might adapt well as a flowchart. Try putting some of your items in order, with arrows showing the flow of ideas or events from one item to the next.

If your list tends to cluster into bigger factors, bubble designs work well for grouping those factors. In this format, you write the name of the main factor in the center of a circle and then insert each item that relates to the factor around the word like the spokes of a wheel. These kinds of structures can organize emotional information so that you can see the relationships between ideas visually.

There can be a lot of creativity in structuring. Experiment with any idea that appeals to you. If this is not your usual approach, its novelty might be the impetus for fresh ideas. Moreover, when your emotions are feeling scattered and jumbled, the skill of being well-organized can bring a lot of relief as well as more clarity.

Percentage Breakdowns

For the more spatially or mathematically oriented brain, percentage breakdowns are useful tools for emotional organization. In a percentage breakdown, you list the elements of something and try to weight their relative contributions to the total. You try to be exhaustive; that is, you try to add up all of the elements to reach a total of 100 percent, which usually means giving a percentage to a miscellaneous category.

The following listing shows an example of how this technique can handle very complicated material. It's how I think of breaking down and separating the facets of what constitutes personality. There is nothing scientific here. This is just an organized way to state an opinion.

Influences on Personality

Component	Percentage Contribution
Cultural and historical background	23%
Genetic and physical predisposition	20%
Early relationships with caretakers, parents	25%
Siblings	8%
Peer relationships	7%
General social relationships	3%
Extended family	3%
Educational experiences	2%
Early transitions or loss experiences	5%
Miscellaneous (nutrition, random events, etc.)	4%
Total	=100%

It helps to lay out the largest factors first and start with guesses for percentages. After that, it always takes a lot of fiddling to get the numbers to feel as if each item has been given the right weight and still have everything add up to 100 percent. Keeping a category for miscellaneous items gives you some flexibility, and you can list any ideas you have for that category.

Exercise 22 is a percentage breakdown. Doing this exercise often helps people who are in therapy. It consists of considering all the factors that contributed to feeling a certain emotion at a certain time. If some of your strong emotions seem to rise up out of the blue or at random, this exercise reminds you that feelings are caused by the convergence of many real and complex forces. When you take the time to consider all of these forces, as a rule, you will feel less blameworthy and be clearer about which forces you can work with or change. Doing this exercise can also help to maintain hope, because, some forces on your list, such as hormonal influences or work pressures, will be time-limited.

Think of a recent strong, distinct feeling you've had. Then, list any and every factor that contributed to you having that feeling. Be sure to include some aspect of physical context (for example, if you were exhausted, on any drugs, had just exercised, etc.), current interactions and relationships, and any of your known emotional triggers that may have occurred. If you are in a general funk because of current events, put that on your list. If weather affects you a lot, assign it a percentage. If you had a strong feeling without a specific stimulus, think about the

general events and interactions you were engaged in before you had the feeling. That may give you some clues.

EXERCISE 22

Factors of a Feeling

The following variables combined to cause me to feel . . . .
[name the feeling]

Factor	Percentage Contribution
. . . .	(. . . . .)
	( )
	( )
. . . .	(. . . . .)
	( )
	( )
	( )
. . . .	(. . . . .)
	( )
. . . .	(. . . . .)
. . . .	(. . . . .)
	( )
. . . .	(. . . . .)
. . . .	(. . . . .)
	( )

Total=100%

These exercises highlight structures that can help you if you don't know where to begin to understand your feelings, or if you have so many diverse thoughts you don't know how to wrap them up or draw a conclusion. You will now apply these structures to some basic principles of emotional organization.

BALANCE

Emotions are never simple events. The forces that create emotions are complex, and so are our experiences of our emotions. The paradox of trying to organize our emotions is that the structure itself must accommodate so much paradox. Feelings blend with and oppose each other constantly. F. Scott Fitzgerald said, "The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at one time and still retain the ability to function" (1945). The same holds true for emotions, and it is an absolutely crucial principle for managing feelings.

The emotion management skills of being able to tolerate ambiguity and knowing how to juggle opposing forces flourish in journal writing. Journaling gets all the pieces of a feeling out, onto the page, where they can be revisited, rearranged, weighed against each other, or simply laid out to view.

Many Facets

To begin to develop your balancing skills, you will use the techniques of structured writing to look at just how complicated your emotions can be. Label the beginning of Exercise 23 with the name of a person or an event that is emotionally loaded for you; that is, it has had a significant impact on who you are. Then list every feeling, thought, or impression you recall ever having or currently have about that person or event. Think back through your history, look at it from every angle, and root out every bit of response you can find in yourself.

EXERCISE 23

Emotional Complexity

. . . . [Important person or event]

Feelings and responses

1. . . . .
2. . . . .
3. . . . .
4. . . . .
5. . . . .
6. . . . .
7. . . . .
8. . . . .
9. . . . .
10. . . . .
11. . . . .
12. . . . .
13. . . . .
14. . . . . . .
15. . . . . . .
16. . . . . .
17. . .
18. . . . . . .

Exercise 23 uses a list to open up possibilities. Themes and patterns might seem to weave through your list, or it might look and feel like a crazy quilt of reactions with nothing in common. This list can be a tangible reminder not to bother looking for consistency in your feelings. It's more productive to ask how your different reactions can fit together inside of you.

Flip Sides

The basic fit of our varied feelings is beautifully captured by the Chinese yin-yang symbol. We all have dark and light sides to our emotional nature in general and to how we feel about anything in particular. And buried deep within each side we all have the kernel of the opposite truth.

Human nature is paradoxical. Sometimes, the people who really irritate us also have some compelling bit of attraction for us, or we wouldn't be so concerned. Deep within an act of generosity there may be a strong wish for a response or some kind of care in return. Sometimes we don't see the most significant aspects of the people to whom we feel closest. All of our human character traits are essentially neutral until they are applied in progressive or destructive ways.

Our strongest blessings are truly also our worst curses. Exercise 24, based on that idea, is a written version of a yin-yang symbol. Your task is to write about what you see as your strongest trait. On the top half of the page, write a few sentences describing the positive ways that trait is expressed or works for you. Then read that paragraph and write a phrase or sentence summarizing it on the line at the bottom of the page. Then, on the bottom half of the page, write about the negative aspects and consequences of that trait and sum them up on the line indicated in the middle of the page.

EXERCISE 24

Emotional Paradox

. . . [my strongest trait]

Positive manifestations:

In short, . . .
[negative summary]

Negative manifestations:

In short,
[positive summary]

Now read what you've written for Exercise 24 from the top to the bottom. It might seem strange, but does it capture some poetic reality of your perception of yourself? If you are inclined toward either inflating or diminishing your self-image, this exercise can reinforce a neutral view of yourself. It does this by cutting out your secondary feelings, as you did in Exercise 9. It can also make you aware of the connotations of the words you use. For example, "being able to make contact with people" might sound like a positive trait, but in another context, the same trait might be described negatively with words like "needy" or "clingy."

Hopefully, this exercise will show you how writing about the flip sides of your feelings encourages you to write richer descriptions and brings more depth to your awareness. Awareness, neutrality, and the ability to juggle different feelings can tame your emotions.

SCHEMA

The word "schema" derives from the Greek word for form. *Cognitive schemas* are habitual patterns of thought. We plug our ongoing experiences into these prefabricated mental structures so that we don't have to start from scratch every time we want to think about or comprehend our world. Although this is mentally economical, we run into problems when our schemas are too rigid, biased, or negative.

Schemas based on bad experiences perpetuate bad feelings. When one small bit of perception fits the larger preconceived form, we may assume that the whole form is present. For example, if you are used to repeated harsh criticisms, a minor critical comment can actually evoke the same brain reactions and some of the same physical and behavioral responses from you as an abusive tirade would.

Changing Your Schema

If any of your cognitive schemas are obsolete or self-destructive, organizational writing skills can help you change them. To change a schema, you must first be aware of it so that you can observe those experiences that disprove it. You need to have enough of those contrary experiences to create new schemas that will override your old, inadequate ones. It is a gradual process, but writing can help you to formulate, notice, and reinforce your new patterns.

Exercise 25 offers one way to use writing to rework your schema. First, you'll define your belief or pattern, then you'll look for evidence to the contrary in your experience, and finally, you will define a replacement schema. This will reinforce the development of your new schema or paradigm.

For this exercise, choose a belief you hold that you know is self-defeating. For example, common stumbling blocks in therapy are beliefs such as "I can't change how I am" or "If I get better, I'll lose my creativity" or "I don't deserve to feel

better." Sometimes these self-defeating beliefs derive from criticisms you've received from others in your past. In chapter 1, there was a discussion of how deeply such criticisms can be imprinted.

Negative schema often take the form of strong or absolute "should" types of statements, as in "I must always be perfect to earn the affection others may have for me." After you've identified a negative belief, list experiences that disprove your belief. In this "should" example, you might note something like "My sister called to check how I was when I got fired from my job," which clearly contradicts the idea that no one will care about you if you're not perfect.

To end this exercise, write a new statement at the bottom of the page that converts your schema into something useful, as in this example, "People still support and love me, even when I'm not perfect." At the very least, you can use this exercise to prove to yourself that your negative assumptions about yourself are not always true.

EXERCISE 25

Reworking a Schema

Negative statement: I always

Experiences to the contrary:

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

Revised and productive statement: I

Exercise 25 can be used several times, because we usually have more than one schema that we keep tripping over. You can copy it or just use the basic format in a separate notebook. When habitual beliefs of any sort are contradicted, it can be jarring. But when you clearly state the opposite of an habitual belief, you can open up new pathways in your brain that will lead to new behaviors.

THE COHERENT VIEW

At this point, you have the capacity to write your way out of most of your emotional confusion or any uncertainty you encounter. You've worked with some principles of emotion management that provide you with leverage to improve your overall emotional experiences. You've written about ways to define your feelings, break them down, and think them through. In the organizing spirit of this chapter, here is a list of some principles that are the foundation for a lot of the work you've done with emotion management so far:

A Coherent View of Emotions

- Emotions are the complex results of many forces, and contradictory feelings combine together all the time.
- You can't decide what to feel but you can modify your experience of your feelings a great deal by understanding them, modulating them, and viewing them without judgment.
- You will tend to perceive events according to the templates of your early, strong emotional experiences.
- You will tend to react similarly to ways you reacted in the past to similar situations.
- The strength of your reaction depends on the similarity to the original situation and on the emotional and physical context of the experience.
- Emotions that are experienced consciously, especially if they are expressed, are less reflexive and less easily provoked.
- When you write, you can manipulate all of these processes to some degree. You can study and explore your feelings, move them along or tone them down, and use distance and insight to neutralize negative evaluations of your own emotions.

These principles and the writing you've done based on them have addressed many of the emotion management skills of consciousness and clarity. Armed with these skills, you can approach that intangible sense of personal coherence discussed in chapter 1 as the third "C."

A Coherent View of the Self

A coherent view of yourself must be based on being clear and conscious over a period of time and observing yourself as dispassionately as possible. You will see patterns of reaction to types of events under certain conditions. Self-knowledge is really the strongest tool you can use to live a coherent life; to have a basic security that, underneath it all, things make some kind of sense.

Talking to other people helps further the process of gaining self-knowledge. In or out of therapy, talking forces you to higher levels of self-observation. You see more because you are aware of your audience, and you try to form and state your thoughts in ways that will be comprehended by others.

Reviewing your journals also can help in developing a view of yourself moving coherently through your life. You can highlight important sections of old journals. You can look for specific content areas and keep a list of what you had to say about each topic at different times. For instance, people struggling to leave bad relationships can be strengthened by reviewing repeated writing about the pain the relationship has caused over time. As you discovered in Exercise 4, writing provides you with views of yourself over time that your memory misses and your current feelings may mask.

Instead of looking at one emotion over time, you can also look at a lot of different emotions at a single point in time. In psychological research design, that is called a cross-sectional, as opposed to a longitudinal, study. A cross-sectional study of your emotions would show many different feelings coexisting and competing for expression. Since you've seen that these different feelings are never a unanimous force, the best way to manage them is to understand the interactions of these emotional forces within you.

One method for getting a better view of your inner system is to write a dialogue for the different parts of yourself. You can do this by naming the complex aspects of yourself or your feelings, and then allowing them to speak and interact as separate beings inside of you. A "parts-of-self" dialogue is written exactly like a play, with the speaker's name to the left, colons, and then what the different voices say in a conversational style. To do this, all you need is a topic and some notion of what your separate parts are and what to call them. The best topic is something that you know causes you internal conflict. An argument creates automatic dramatic tension. Spinning out your thoughts from distinctly different angles can also help you sort out what you want to do when you're in a dilemma.

Determining your separate parts is trickier. Personality theories provide some ideas. There is the Freudian id, superego, and ego division, which roughly

corresponds to the inner child, parent, and adult of rational emotive therapy. Jungian theory suggests you could have a dialogue between the masculine and feminine aspects of yourself. If you have conflicting feelings for someone, you could allow those differing feelings to talk about that person. Or you can have a conversation between your various selves at different ages. Sometimes a good place to start is the children's game of Rock, Paper, Scissors, where Rock is the strong and immovable aspect of yourself, Paper is the receptive and flexible aspect of yourself, and Scissors is your sharp and effective part. For your last exercise in this chapter, pick a topic and decide on different parts of yourself or your feelings to talk about that topic. Allow a conversation to develop and flow as much as possible between the parts. The dialogue doesn't have to end up anywhere or resolve anything, but let each part have its own say.

EXERCISE 26

Dialogue among the Parts of Yourself

Exercise 26 can be fun and it can illuminate some of the patterns within yourself. It's important to know which emotions are coexisting, and which part of yourself tends to win in an argument. You can feel coherent in the sense that all of your parts work together, even if they aren't uniform or terribly efficient.

GOING PAST THE "THREE C'S"

With this chapter, you've essentially covered the "Three C's" of emotion management: consciousness, clarity, and coherence. You will also use writing techniques for emotion management maintenance, or to keep yourself at a consistently calmer and more positive baseline. But first you are going to learn how to use writing for damage control. The next chapter looks at ways to handle the inevitable limits and failures of emotion management.

• CHAPTER 7 •

Regroup!

This chapter is about the inevitable limits of emotion management. You are going to take a look at what you've accomplished so far and it's been a lot; but it is also important to assess what hasn't been accomplished or can't be accomplished. You will learn to *regroup*. This means getting ready to try again after experiencing a setback, or a specific failure or disappointment in your emotion management plan. How do you minimize those types of experiences, recover, and accept them? Regrouping skills are necessary because, unfortunately, failures and disappointments don't ever entirely stop.

Your emotion management skills have been building, and as they develop they reinforce each other. Your ability to distance yourself from your feelings as discussed in chapter 2 helped you to define your feelings in chapter 3, which helped you to organize your feelings in chapter 6, which provided you with skills to create even more distance from your feelings. The ability to refocus, discussed in chapter 5, leads directly to the concept of regrouping, which could give you another opportunity to release a deeply buried feeling. Emotion management skills mesh together in many ways.

The last two chapters of this journal, on regrouping and maintaining your emotion management skills, are a kind of fine-tuning. They will help you to remember that the skills involved in emotion management are all relative. There is no system for total emotion management, and whatever skills you learn or concepts you understand from your work with this journal will improve your emotional life. Emotion management is a lot easier when you accept limits and appreciate your own intentions and efforts.

EMOTIONS ARE LIKE THE WEATHER

Your emotional life is an internal climate. Like the weather, emotions are the result of the convergence of many forces. Also like the weather, your overall experience is made up of many factors. On a rainy day, moisture is the main factor in the weather, but on a cold day that turns to snow. And if it's a windy day, the weather can change from a gentle snowfall to a blizzard. Even though a myriad of factors combine to make both weather conditions and emotional states, one small change can alter the essential experience of the day or the feeling.

WHY CONTROL ISN'T THE "FOURTH C"

This comparison of weather and emotional states goes back to the point that control is not one of the "Three C's" of emotion management (consciousness, clarity, and coherence). You don't control the weather but you deal with it. Similarly, you really can't directly control what you feel. If you try to force yourself to feel something, usually the opposing feelings only get stronger and you become confused or behave erratically.

Emotions are dominant and reactive forces in our brains and bodies. Everyone is born with individual quirks of fate, biology, and history already in motion that will drastically affect their feelings. There are also so many unknown forces that give each life a unique quality. When you consider the scale of all of these forces, the idea of controlling your emotions seems absurd.

Despite understanding your own emotional processes and the triggers that set you off, you still can be caught off guard emotionally or be flooded by too much feeling. Your background vulnerabilities affect your threshold for losing emotional clarity or balance. These might include physical strain or tiredness, recent changes, disruptions in your normal soothing routines, and disturbing interactions. At some point, forces like these can combine in a way you simply can't anticipate or stop.

Meteorologists don't make the day sunny. They study how different weather forces combine, they assess the prevailing conditions, and then they advise on how to dress for the weather or whether to expect a bad rush hour. Emotionally, you also have to be adaptive in such ways. You study and watch over the conditions and make the adjustments you can.

WHAT CAN YOU CONTROL?

Understanding the limits of control you have over your feelings is ultimately more liberating than discouraging. For one thing, you can stop trying to control your feelings and experiencing failure or a backfiring of your efforts. Also, you can see

that although you can't control your feelings, you still have a lot of power in managing them. You get your power from being able to:

- Understand the forces that create feelings,
- Minimize the negative impact of feelings,
- Recover from the negative impact that can't be prevented, and
- Accept the limits of control you do have and appreciate the efforts you make.

You've already worked through the first two steps on this list. You've studied and observed your emotional system and thought about the triggers that affect it. In chapter 6, some of the principles that underlie emotional processes were listed, and you've experimented with modifying those processes, such as by releasing your emotions more easily and changing your thought patterns.

You've also done a lot of work on minimizing your emotional problems. You've practiced skills that slow down or speed up your feelings when you need to in chapters 4 and 5. You've built in cues to help you think positively or to feel less overwhelmed in an intense situation as quickly as possible (see chapters 2 and 5). You are then able to decide where to focus and how to respond in a balanced way.

With this knowledge you can make larger decisions that will help your emotions to run smoothly and comfortably. You can set up situations that reinforce your positive feelings, and you can build ongoing emotional releases from negative feelings into your routines. You'll work with these ideas in the last chapter of this guided journal.

Because you have reached this point of emotion management ability, you'll now start to work on the idea of recovery. This work will be for those times when you get beyond the limits of what your skills can handle.

RECOVERY

Recovery means getting back on track and moving away from the pain of an emotionally overwhelming experience. It also means doing some damage control for regrettable behavior caused by intense emotions, for example, avoiding something you wanted to do out of fear; saying something cruel out of anger; or doing something punishing to yourself out of frustration or sadness. Recovery has three parts: first recognize the process, then fix what you can, and, finally, soothe yourself.

The Steps of Recovery

If you recognize your regrettable behaviors as breakdowns in emotion management, you can usually understand them more clearly and do so with less criticism of yourself. Then secondary feelings won't cloud the issues and slow down your recovery. Try to skip the shame or blame or guilt. Assume you did the best you could and managed the issues as quickly as you could.

Next you try to repair the situation as much as you can. This might mean trying something again on a smaller scale. Often it means talking to someone and apologizing. When you apologize, it helps if you explain that you understand the impact your emotions had on the other person, and that you have ideas or plans for handling your feelings better in the future. Usually, it doesn't help to explain your feelings themselves any further.

This is a good time to use your journal writing skills because you may need to work on your emotions before making another attempt at communication. Sometimes the repair is tangible and concrete, like sweeping up the pieces of broken dishes or returning recently purchased clothing to stores. Thinking of such actions as repairs instead of focusing on them as mistakes may make them feel less burdensome.

At this point, remembering to soothe yourself might not come naturally. But you should also assume you need sympathy. Overwhelming feelings do take their toll. Exercise 27 is aimed at this point of recovery.

EXERCISE 27

The Recovery Business Card

For this exercise, you'll prepare a few small reminder cards for yourself. Whenever you try to recover from an emotionally overwhelming experience and regain your equilibrium, these reminder cards can be very useful. Imagine yourself losing it emotionally in a typical way or take a look at how you described yourself in the "before" description of Exercise 2. Then answer these three questions:

1. What one word sums up what is causing you to feel overwhelmed (for example, the name of a person, an emotion, or a place with bad associations)?

. . . .

2. What one thing can you say right now about that word that will help you to keep your perspective?

. . . .

. . . .

3. What one thing can you say right now about that word that would reassure and comfort you?

. . . .

. . . .

That's your recovery business card. Use the back of an actual business card or a small piece of cardboard. At the top, you'll write "On . . . . ", and write the word that is your answer to the first question. Then write the two sentences that answer questions 2 and 3. You can decorate your card, or add something funny or a pleasing design element. Try to make a few cards in this format on the issues that most often throw you off of your emotional balance. Then put the cards where it will be easy to get to them, like in your wallet or at your bedside. Here are two examples of recovery cards to help you design yours.

On: My friend

My friend does not mean to make me feel bad about myself.

I'm getting better at relating to her because of all the work I've done on emotion management.

On: Dread

The frightening things you see ahead won't be so daunting once you get to them because they will be drained of some of the meaning you think they have now.

Everything really will be alright.

You might have more ideas for recovery cards to leave in different places as emotion management reminders. Perhaps you can put some into the pockets of off-season clothing or in the freezer, where the surprise of coming across your card will give your reassuring message to yourself more impact. Reinforcement can come in handy at odd times.

ACCEPTANCE

Acceptance is the glue that holds all of the emotion management techniques together. If you accept the limits of your abilities to manage your emotions, you can accept your feelings. If you can accept your feelings, you really can accept yourself, and from there, everything basically works.

Internal Interference

Despite putting out all of your best efforts, some of the forces against you are within you. We can never totally eliminate the conflicts we feel and we can never be totally conscious of all of our feelings. We all sometimes make decisions against our better interests or hold onto feelings that have no use and only hinder us.

Exercise 28 is about resistance to progress. To get a feeling for your internal potential to sabotage yourself, you'll write for one page, starting with the phrase, "I don't wanna . . ." Let yourself ramble on from that starting point. Write this page with your nondominant hand (left hand if you're right-handed, right hand if you're left-handed). It will feel very awkward and childish.

EXERCISE 28

A Word from the Resistance

I don't wanna . . .

Writing with your nondominant hand feels unnatural and frequently reminds people of their school-age feelings. It draws out more unfiltered and primitive thinking because of its unnaturalness. It's the perfect medium for expressing anything from immature resistance to temper tantrums.

Internal Appreciation

The reverse side of accepting your resistance is appreciating your efforts. If you've gotten this far in this journal, even if you've barely skimmed it, you've done something positive for yourself. Even if you feel you've failed entirely, you can appreciate your intention to improve. Improvement is always slow, incomplete, and artificial at first. New purposeful behaviors and attitudes often have awkward beginnings and can feel forced compared to behaviors that develop more naturally. Over time, though, the new behaviors take on their own life and you can stop noticing that you are trying.

For the last exercise in this chapter, you'll evaluate your development with this journal so far, with an eye toward appreciating what you've done. Go back and look at Exercises 1 and 2, where you described your goals. Do you see any positive movement in those directions, or have your goals changed as your understanding of yourself and emotion management has changed? Are your problems of emotion management less frequent, less intense, or less annoying? Have you changed your viewpoint about yourself or about your emotions?

If you feel that you can hold onto your composure and sense of comfort in the face of strong emotions for even one second, you've got the basics. Remember, over time a one-degree change in an angle becomes broader and broader.

Exercise 29 is a sort of report card on your progress. Write a little bit about how you've answered these questions and how you've evaluated your changes. Then think of four or five specific areas to "grade." You can look at Exercise 1 for ideas or you can just list goals you've been thinking about. The only grade in this grading system is an A, so put down anything you want.

EXERCISE 29

Emotion Management Report Card

Comments:

Grades: Effort to . . . . : A

Effort to : A

Effort to : A

Effort to : A

Effort to : A

GOING ON

Congratulations on your report card. Handling your feelings can be hard. Life is full of challenges all the time for everyone. You never need to feel alone on that. The last chapter of this journal is about the ongoing nature of emotion management. Now that you're at whatever level of appreciation of yourself you've achieved, how will you keep it going?

• CHAPTER 8 •

Maintain!

This last chapter of your guided journal is about maintaining and incorporating the skills and ideas you've been learning throughout the book. You will be shifting to long-term concerns, like when you meet your goal on a weight-loss diet and try to focus on maintaining your new healthy eating habits.

Overall maintenance of your emotion management abilities doesn't require a lot of discipline, but it does need attention. To keep your emotional baseline positive and your resistance to emotional flooding strong, you must be thoughtful about how you set up and manage your emotional life. You'll look at three areas where you can easily achieve a good long-term effect on your emotional life: physical well-being, positive activities, and ongoing emotion monitoring. If these three aspects of your life are satisfying and moving in a good direction, you will have much less emotional overload to manage.

Finally, you are going to think about transitioning out of this journal. The work you do on maintenance will give you a platform for leaving the journal and continuing to use and develop your journaling and emotion management skills. You can draw your own conclusions to carry with you past the structure of the work you've done in these pages.

PHYSICAL WELL-BEING

From the first pages of this guided journal the connection between physical and emotional events has been a consistent theme. Whatever makes you feel physically calm and cared for helps your emotional life. Generally, when you feel

healthy, you view your experiences in a positive light. It may be hard to recognize that connection until you don't feel well, and then you remember what a negative impact poor health can have on your emotions.

Similarly, when you feel relaxed, it's harder for emotional events to trigger stress responses in your body. Some researchers have observed that Tibetan Buddhist monks who devote their lives to meditative practice don't get startled even by nearby loud sounds. Their physical systems such as heart rate, breathing, and skin temperature remain constant because their baseline of reactivity is trained to be so low (Dingfelder 2003).

You are definitely not aiming for that level of relaxation, but this is a good time to think about what does help to keep your physical-emotional base as calm and composed as possible. Most people have some choices of activities that they know are physically helpful and that they can realistically expect to do.

Exercise 30 is set up for you to take a personal inventory of physical routines or practices that can help you to maintain your emotional balance. Just complete the following paragraphs in any form you are comfortable with. You can write lists, short essays, or just relax and write them as stream of consciousness entries.

EXERCISE 30

Emotion and Body Owner's Manual

Physical activities that make me feel strong are:

The best way for me to feel restful and relaxed is:

The ways I most feel physically taken care of are:

The activities I enjoy physically or sensually are:

Exercise 30 is meant to remind you of what you can do physically to improve your emotional baseline. It's very important to include some kind of exercise or movement, relaxation, and pleasure in your daily routines. It is also important to assess any habits you have that you think might be detrimental to your emotional well-being. Finally, as a physical being, it's very important for you to maintain some contact with nature, away from the stress and noise of the human-made world. You may need to restructure your life to actually do the activities you know will keep you emotionally balanced, but if you at least keep them in mind, they are more likely to happen.

POSITIVE ACTIVITIES

Sometimes, we all get so wrapped up with the problems our emotions raise that it's easy to forget that positive influences on emotions need to be cultivated. Having fun, feeling successful, and enjoying other people are essential good experiences that bring a strong positive force into your emotional world. Every good experience reinforces your potential for happiness. In your efforts to minimize bad emotional experiences, it's important to also figure out how to make good experiences more likely to occur.

As in Exercise 30, where you worked with ideas for your physical well-being, Exercise 31 is meant to help you think about those activities that are fun to do and create positive emotions for you.

EXERCISE 31

Positive Activities List

Quickly list ten things you like to do for pleasure and for fun:

. . . .

. . . .

. . . .

. . . .

. . . .

. . . .

. . . .

. . . .

. . . .

. . . .

Now review your list. After each item, write down the date when you last did that activity (if you ever have done it). Then number each item in the list from 1 to 10, based on how easy it is for you to get to do that activity. For example, the easiest activity to get to on your list might be "Eating" while the number 10 item could be something like "Taking hot-air balloon rides."

Doing Exercise 31 may demonstrate to you that sometimes it may be necessary to forcefully make room for fun in your life. If you take positive activities for granted, it's too easy for pressures and obligations and tasks to crowd your time. This list might also remind you of resources you have that you haven't used in a while. If a fun item has a low number and a long-ago date, you will know that you've missed opportunities. Make sure you get to do some easy low-number items soon, and maybe you can figure out ways to make some other items more accessible or make plans to do them anyway.

ONGOING EMOTION MONITORING

After you finish working with this guided journal, you'll need some ongoing way to continue to monitor your emotions. This will help you manage your feelings in two ways. First of all, you'll know what you're working with and you'll be alerted by the trends you observe. Furthermore, your method of monitoring your emotions can also be a calming force in itself, because it reinforces your detachment from the feelings you're observing.

There is really nothing like a journal for monitoring emotions, but there are a lot of ways to keep an eye on yourself and your feelings. I know one woman who thinks through her life on her daily walks with her dog. If she's without her dog for any period of time, she gets thrown emotionally. Relationships also can be used for monitoring. Emotional monitoring is definitely one function of psychotherapy, but that's probably also true of coffee clubs, book groups, religious or twelve-step meetings, and regular lunch dates. Any regularly set time or connection where your focus is beyond the immediate task can be sufficient to maintain a sense of your emotional course.

Journals, though, have some unique advantages as a way to track your emotional life. You've experienced some of these advantages through working with this journal, such as the soothing physical nature of writing (see Exercise 12) and the capacity to provide a realistic review of your past (see Exercise 4). The qualities of journaling that matter vary from one person to another. What is consistent in my experience is that people benefit from approaching and using journals with curiosity and some determination, but without pressure. When that gentle approach is taken, an unpredicted and positive result almost always follows.

TRACKING MOODS

Keeping systematic track of your moods or intense feelings over time is a specific category of emotion monitoring. Tracking moods is more scientific than writing about feelings. It's based on documenting standardized information at regular intervals. This process can be very helpful for people with mood disorders, but anyone can find it interesting to see a kind of organized personal database of their emotions recorded over time.

Mood Logs

A *mood log* is a format for making regular notes of your moods and what affects them. It is usually a simple form with a few items to check off or rate on a daily basis. Standardized mood logs have been developed for use in research studies or for medical purposes, such as one developed by the Depression and Bipolar Support

Alliance to help people with severe mood disorders (2001). But anyone can benefit from regular tracking of their moods or intense feelings. This kind of systematic observation always yields information about the factors that affect your emotional system, and sometimes it reveals surprising patterns that cannot be seen at a single point in time.

EXERCISE 32

Designing Your Mood Log

Exercise 32 will direct you to design a mood log tailored to your situation and interests. You will make a blank form that you can copy and use for daily recording. The first decision to make is to pick what you want to track. Choose a mood or an intense feeling that you want to understand better. When you've picked the mood you want to track, you'll answer the following four questions about that mood or feeling every day:

1. What is the range of your mood or feeling during the day? (Using the 0–10 numerical rating system from Exercise 8, record the lowest and highest points of your feeling or mood during the day. For example, if you are tracking anger and you had a day that started out almost free of anger, but you got pretty mad in the afternoon, your range might be from 1 to 6).

2. What is the average level of your mood or feeling during the day? (Using the 0–10 numerical rating system from Exercise 8 again, write one number that is the midpoint for how much you felt that feeling during the day. In the example above, perhaps you briefly reached a rating of 6 for anger in the afternoon, but you were fairly low-key the rest of the day. Your average level of anger for a day like that might be a 2 or 3).

3. What percentage of the time during the day did you feel this mood or feeling? (Write a percentage from 0, which would mean you didn't feel the feeling all day, to 100, meaning you felt it constantly every waking minute).

4. What one word sums up the emotional tone of your day? (For this question, whatever you are tracking, leave space for one word to describe the overall mood of the day. Even if this word is unrelated to what you are specifically tracking, it provides information about the context surrounding the mood or feeling that you are investigating).

Next, you need to decide on a few variables to track along with your information about your mood. These are factors that you think may have an effect on your moods, but you may not be sure how much they effect your feelings or in what ways. For instance, you may wonder if daylight affects your mood, or eating dessert, or seeing a specific person. Then your variables could be "light," "desserts," and "Joe." Usually mood logs include some physical information, such as sleep quality, exercise, menstrual cycle, or eating patterns. Pick four or five variables you would be interested in tracking along with your moods and list them here:

1. ....
2. ....
3. ....
4. ....
5. ....

When you fill in your mood log, under each of your variables, you can simply check which ones were present that day or write a word or two. In the example above, of tracking "light," "desserts," and "Joe," you might make a check under the "light" column if it was a sunny day, write a number under the "desserts" column indicating how many desserts you ate that day, and you could make a check under the "Joe" column if you saw Joe that day. If you want a little more specific information, you could write "visit," "phone," or "email" under the "Joe" column to indicate the type of contact. You can use any indicators to describe your variable. Just be sure your indicators are simple and consistent within each variable.

Now you are ready to set up your mood log by filling in the Mood Log form that follows. Write the name of the mood or feeling that you are monitoring on the line at the top of the Mood Log form. Write your variables on the right side of the page in the squares above each column, right under where it says "Variable 1," "Variable 2," and so forth.

Mood Log (Week of . . . . to . . . .)

Monitoring . . . .
[mood or feeling]

	Range of Feeling (0–10 rating)	Average Level of Feeling (0–10 rating)	Percent of Time You Felt the Feeling	General Emotional Tone of the Day (one word)	Variable 1	Variable 2	Variable 3	Variable 4	Variable 5	Notes or Major Events
Sun	(–)		%							
Mon	(–)		%							
Tues	(–)		%							
Wed	(–)		%							
Thurs	(–)		%							
Fri	(–)		%							
Sat	(–)		%							

Setting up your mood log can be a bit of a project, but using it will be a lot easier. Keep copies of it by your bedside and fill it in before you go to sleep. After you accumulate entries for a week or two, you can analyze the information. You might want to use a highlighting pen and highlight the line for each day your mood was over a certain average number to see if those days had anything else in common. If you just study your chart, you are bound to get some useful information from seeing how the different forces affecting your moods change and interact every day.

Monitoring your emotions probably doesn't get more structured than this, so mood logs won't apply or appeal to everyone, but experimenting for a short time with one is worthwhile, and some people might want to expand the chart to include even more information or feelings to study.

ONGOING JOURNALING

Using a journal to monitor emotions fits somewhere between the kind of informal monitoring you can do when you take the dog out for a walk and the very systematic use of a mood log. If there is one thing that you can see from the variety of exercises in this journal, it's that there are a lot of ways to use journaling and writing. Some people write in their journals all the time. However, I've observed that most people have certain eras in their lives when they keep journals and long spells when they don't write at all. I've always assumed there is some wisdom in those natural decisions and in not pressuring yourself about journaling.

For those times when you are into journaling, there are many techniques to experiment with. I think the best is the "morning pages" as described by Julia Cameron in *The Artist's Way* (1992). The essence of this system is to write a set amount loosely and continuously as the first thing you do in the morning every day. To get a feel for this you need to do it regularly for a while, so this is the one exception to never pressuring yourself about writing. You write for a short but set amount of time or pages and, basically, you try to use the unedited stream of consciousness technique. The clarity you can achieve after the dust has settled from the day before and before the day ahead begins is amazing. Dreams tend to surface also. This is a meditative practice, illuminating and soothing all at once.

Here are some other journaling ideas:

- Keep a crisis journal.
- Write one-liners.
- Journal with people or on an online journaling site (pay attention to maintaining anonymity).
- Make collages in journals of found objects, pictures, and mementos.

- Write in different colors and media and experiment with different papers, notebooks, and writing on objects such as bark or rocks.
- Write your journal as a letter to someone.
- Collect quotes in a journal and write about them.
- Write down your dreams and analyze them.
- Carry a small journal to write in during the day or carry index cards and turn your journal into a box for the cards.

However you journal, one way it will help you is in keeping track of yourself. Journals always include some aspect of emotion management, even if their main purpose seems much easier and less serious.

MOVING OUT OF YOUR GUIDED JOURNAL

Any intense project needs attention paid to its ending. Reviewing, summarizing, or debriefing are some of the ways you can package an experience so that it will always be with you. These activities also help you to register that you might be reacting emotionally to the change or loss of whatever it is that you are finalizing. Leaving this journal thoughtfully is important in those ways, and it gives your work and efforts with this book a fitting ending.

A good way to start this review is to flip through the pages of this guided journal and allow yourself to notice at random what you've written or read. Take as much time as you want with this. Then read through the table of contents and write notes in the margins about what you felt or remember and which exercises were the most useful. If some exercises really captured something important for you, you might copy the pages and use them to make a whole notebook of just those exercises. Or you can insert blank pages in the journal where you liked the exercises and you might return to those places and do them again. You can also make a list of your favorite exercises with brief descriptions of their formats and type it in a computer or tape it inside a blank notebook for possible future use.

When you've finished your review of the journal, write your conclusion of the process you experienced with this book as Exercise 33. What are the main points or impressions that will stay with you? This is definitely a good exercise to start by first taking a few deep breaths.

After you write your conclusion, take a look at the one I wrote and you will see the individuality of our points of view. I will have emphasized different aspects of the experiences to be found in this guided journal and boiled them down to different messages than you will. This comparison can serve as one more reminder that we are all working to make sense of our experiences within the frameworks and processes that are uniquely our own.

EXERCISE 33

Conclusion

Conclusion

The best reward that a venture like this guided journal can give to you is the idea of carefully considering the beliefs you used to assume were true. Once you experience the value of examining your assumptions, you keep seeing the next assumption you want to question.

When your assumptions collapse, though, you can easily begin to feel mired in the incredible complexity and amorphous nature of your emotions.

This journal offers a variety of structures to help you approach your emotional world because different structures suit different people. Throughout this journal, the exercises you've done demonstrate that many types of structures can help you to understand and manage your feelings. Some focus more on physical processes, while others concentrate on mental processes. It's helpful to sample different approaches to find those structures that are comfortable for you and to understand why they work.

This book also provides shortcuts for many of these structures. Each exercise is essentially a shortcut for learning and experiencing an emotion management skill. And much of the work you've done with the journal is intended to create a condensed representation of a particular emotion management process, such as cues to signal yourself that you are at risk of losing your emotional balance, or symbols that you associate with emotional comfort.

These shortcuts redirect the responsive nature of emotions. Emotional reactions can be very quick and having previously prepared shortcuts available to you makes it likelier that your reflexive responses will have the results that you want them to have. Then, when you are less immediately affected by your emotions, you can think more deeply about how your emotions can serve your goals.

Whatever it is that you do want from your emotional life, the capacity to feel your emotions freely is essential. When you have a sense of composure and integrity about and access to your feelings, it's very easy to see clearly in most situations. Avoidance of emotion for any reason is what confuses most situations. The avoidance clouds your ability to see the full range of your experience and obscures relationships because every interaction is an emotional exchange to some degree. Knowledge of yourself and your emotions is the basis of personal power and interpersonal intelligence.

The essential duality of the opposing needs for control and acceptance is the guiding principle behind the structures in this journal. In general, people wish for more control over their emotions than they have. But we are neither defenseless to the forces of history nor to the mechanics of brain functioning. Nothing I've ever learned about how the brain works explains the wish to have it function better. That wish or the drive to have the various elements of yourself and your life work better together is a gift. If you're reading this, you have that gift. Be thankful, although it is a gift that can be hard to manage. Don't pressure yourself, but don't stop trying. It's all in the trying.

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ISBN-10 1-57224-382-1
ISBN-13 978-1-57224-382-8
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